A PLACE OF ILLUSION: A STUDY OF THE WORKS OF IRIS MURDOCH IN RELATION TO CERTAIN ASPECTS OF HER USE OF THE PLATONIC CAVE MYTH

by

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STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVES

Plato's parable of the Cave and the Sun, as a way of picturing man's striving after goodness, is a central image in Iris Murdoch's fiction and non-fiction. However, critics focus too much attention on the apparent end-point of the pilgrimage, that is to say, the Sun, whereas Murdoch's interest is in fact focussed much more democratically among the denizens of the Cave. It is my intention here to explore the reasons for that shift in perception, and to restore a proper sense of perspective to the various stages of the quest for goodness, by looking in detail at Plato's original myth and the way in which Murdoch has customised it to suit her own purposes. Also, Murdoch and her critics have always been acutely aware of the implications of her neo-Platonic views on art and the paradoxes they give rise to, especially as regards her own fiction. However, a new trend in Murdoch's fiction, detectable since about 1980, has put increasing strain on the credibility of her stated early ambitions of reconciling the demands of the formal and the contingent in her brand of realist fiction. This ground is so far largely uncharted by ctitics. It is my purpose here to re-examine Murdoch's fictions as art objects, especially her most recent ones, and to place them in the context of work done in the same field by her contemporaries.

ABSTRACT

Iris Murdoch's philosophy is essentially neo-Platonic, but because of the peculiar path which criticism of her work has taken, the tenor and detail of that philosophy has become misrepresented. The thesis charts the history of Murdoch criticism to show the origins of that misrepresentation, reiterates Plato's original Cave-and-Sun myth of The Republic, and examines anew how Murdoch has customised the myth in order to say more about the Self. The essential qualities promoted by the myth, which I call dynamism, self-deception and democracy, are shown naturally to provide a structure and rationale for the thesis and are thus thrown into fresh relief.

This groundwork is covered in a full Introduction, and the following chapters address the qualities of the myth in detail, applying them directly to Murdoch's fiction and non-fiction.

Chapter One develops the notion of dynamism in Murdoch's writing, as contrasted with the urge her characters have to see goodness in static terms, focussing on her comic play with the Platonic pligrimage and its corruption into a Romantic Quest, and on the way in which, like TS Eliot, she sees artistic and moral mediocrity as linked.

Chapter Two explores Murdoch's picturing of the Fire in the Cave as a way of representing the self as a deceiver and appropriator of Freudian mythology, especially with reference to her articulate male narrators.

Chapter Three discusses the democratic distribution of goodness within the Cave, in the light of the tendency Murdoch's characters (and critics) have of seeing goodness in elitist terms, detecting a new kind of tolerance for life as lived by the Fire, and challenging the way some feminist critics have misrepresented the myth.

Chapter Four charts Murdoch's recent shifts of interest within the Cave, and the emergence of a new category of character.

Chapter Five discusses Murdoch's developing optimism about the role of the Platonic pilgrim, and considers the impact of this optimism on the status of the novels as artefacts.

Chapter Six concludes with an examination of some of the unresloved paradoxes of Murdoch's approach to fiction writing, in the context of her early ambitions and of what contemporary writers are achieving in the same field.

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of Iris Murdoch's The Good Apprentice (1985), Stuart Cuno, the character in the novel who wishes to apprentice himself to goodness, eventually decides upon what form this apprenticeship will take. He resolves to become a teacher and to direct his efforts towards educating the young. He anticipates his role as a teacher in this way:

> 'You can teach language and literature and how to use words so as to *think*. And you can teach moral values, what used to be called prayer, and give them an idea of what goodness is, and how to love it ... Of course the problem is how to do it ... it's all in that, the *whole* problem is in that - I'll have to learn ...' (1)

His father, Harry, replies to this with characteristic scepticism: 'the pure dedicated life is an illusion ... the idea of goodness is romantic opium.' Stuart's stepbrother, Edward, is more sympathetic, and expresses the thought that Stuart 'might become a great educational reformer, we certainly need one,' though he is doubtful about Stuart's reasoning. To his own admision that 'there are good things in the world', he must add a qualification:

> 'But which are they?' said Edward. 'We might all mean different ones.'
> 'Never mind, drink to them. Come.'
> They raised their glasses. (2)

The novel ends on this hopeful, but ambiguous, toast to 'good' and the 'good things'. I begin the discussion at this point partly because it is one of Murdoch's more recent and clear fictional statements on a study of goodness which began in the nineteen-fifties and has so far amounted to twenty-four novels and a number of philosophical books, and partly because the three men clinking glasses at the end of The Good Apprentice represent three types of character which the veteran reader will find little difficulty in recognising throughout Murdoch's fiction. Harry represents an extreme type of character who, like Carel Fisher in The Time of the Angels (1966) and Julius King in A Fairly Honourable Defeat (1970), simply deny the existence of 'goodness', or regard it as a sort of vast confidence trick, an 'illusion', perpetrated by a body of people too weak spirited to acknowledge that they live in a world which operates solely according to the dictates of self-interest. Edward stands for a much more frequently encountered middle-range of characters, for example Michael Meade in The Bell (1958) and John Ducane in The Nice and the Good (1968), for whom the term has meaning, but

whose attitudes to it waver or become revised as a result of their experiences - those for whom, accepting that there are 'good things in the world', the problem remains in deciding *which* things are the good ones. Stuart stands for a third, fairly rare, type of character who, like Brendan Craddock in Henry & Cato (1976) and Tallis Browne in A Fairly Honourable Defeat (1970), operate at the opposite end of the scale to that occupied by Harry - those who dedicate their lives to the pursuit of goodness. They are Murdoch's sub-saintly characters. The conclusion to The Good Apprentice is unusual in that the three types do not, in previous novels, achieve any sort of close harmony, but normally find themselves to be incompatible in fundamental ways.

This awkward unstable trinity of Father (Harry), Son (Stuart) and Wounded Spirit* (Edward) occurs elsewhere in Murdoch's fiction# and suggests a deep structure, perhaps a hierarchy, or at least some coherent way of picturing goodness which informs her outlook.

If we move outside the fiction and look at Murdoch's philosophical works then that structure becomes apparent: it is Plato's parable of the cave and the sun, which he uses in The Republic to illustrate his conception of the human condition and its imperfect grasp on the world about it. I shall quote Plato's parable here, condensing a little, and then describe the particular way in which Murdoch uses it. (See Appendix for a diagrammatic interpretation of the journey.)

> Next, said I, compare our nature in respect of education and its lack to such an experience as this. Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remained in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets ... See also, then, men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well ... in every way such prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of the artificial objects ... Consider, then, what would be the manner of the release and healing from these bonds and this folly ... And if he [the freed prisoner] were compelled to look at the light itself, would that not pain his eyes, and would he not turn away and flee to those things which he is able to discern and regard them as in very deed more clear and exact than the objects pointed out? ... And if ... someone else should drag him thence by force up the ascent which is rough and steep ... do you not think that he would find it painful to be so haled along ... and when he came out into the light, that his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able

> to see even one of the things that we call real? ... Then there would be need of habituation ... And at first he would most easily discern the shadows and, after that, the likenesses or reflections in water ... and later, the things themselves ... And so, finally, I suppose, he would be able to look upon the sun itself and see its true nature ... the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of the good, and that when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things, of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light ... [and] the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this ... And again, do you think it at all strange, said I, if the man returning from divine contemplations to the petty miseries of men cuts a sorry figure and appears most ridiculous, if, while still blinking through the gloom, and before he has become sufficiently accostomed to the environing darkness, he is compelled in courtrooms or elsewhere to contend about the shadows of justice or the images that cast the shadows and to wrangle in debate about the notions of these things in the minds of those who have never seen justice itself? (3)

The metaphor here is one of vision, and the process of enlightenment is pictured as a journey, a pilgrimage, from darkness into light. Goodness is not the sun itself, though it lies in that direction. Rather it is a high-order concept and 'the last thing to be seen and hardly seen' *in the light of* the all-revealing sun. The pilgrim's natural inclination, faced with this hard journey, is to slink back into the depths of the cave, and thus he needs to be 'haled along' by his guide. Thus goodness is *not* picured as a series of fixed incremental gains but as a *dynamic* process involving tremendous sustained effort to avoid backsliding; or, to highlight the vision metaphor, the constant exercise of attention.

Notice too the all-pervasive nature of the bondage described: 'fettered from childhood'. The prisoner seems to be undergoing an elaborate confidence trick perpetrated by hidden conspirators. But bearing in mind that this is a metaphor, and recalling the clink of Blake's 'mind-forg'd manacles', it is easy to appreciate that the bondage being described is not an external phenomenon but essentially a function of the limitations of the prisoner's own mind - and in fact both Plato and Murdoch, in different degrees, enlarge upon this point.

Murdoch takes the parable more or less as given, though she has rather more to say than Plato about the factors that might interfere with that desired attention. Here she is in The Sovereignty of Good (1970) showing her allegiance to the basic parable:

> The sun is seen at the end of a long quest which involves a reorientation (the prisoner has to turn round) and an ascent. It is real, it is out there, but very distant. It gives light and energy and enables us to know truth ... Looking at it itself

> is supremely difficult and is unlike looking at things in its light ... The concept Good resists collapse into the selfish empirical consciousness ... the proper and serious use of the term refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know ... We see differences, we sense directions, and we know the Good is still somewhere beyond. The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. (4)

Again the metaphor is one of vision, and enlightenment takes the form of a journey, a 'quest' in this case, though the journey's end for the pilgrim seems even more distant than in Plato's original. This picture of the Good conveys an idea of infinite distance, as well as its indefinability: we find it hard to look at the sun directly, but know it through the objects it illuminates; we find 'Good' as a noun an awkward proposition, whereas its adjectival use has immediate meaning for us (a good man, a good book, etc.).

For Plato, Good is one of the inviolable, abstract 'forms', and ordinary mortals only know it in so far as the imperfect good we see on the earth to some extent partakes of the perfect form of the Good; much as our ability to draw a circle freehand is informed by our sense of a mathematically perfect circle. If we knew more, or could see more, says Plato, we could judge with more authority.

Murdoch's view is similar, though it differs on two points. Firstly, Plato urges us to transcend this sham world into a world of reality and perfection; Murdoch urges us to transcend our *selves* so as to strip *this* world of our sham delusions and uncover its reality. Secondly, Murdoch tends to stress not so much the expediency of seeing and knowing perfection, but of the sheer power of the self as obscurer of vision. Thus, the dynamic aspect of Murdoch's picture centres on an imminent 'collapse into the selfish empirical consciousness', and the pilgrim's reluctance to strike out on the quest is made more human by an emphasis not just on the harshness of the journey, but on a recognition of the complex lure of the more comfortable, plastic sections of the cave. The upper slopes and the sunlit land are alien places. As she puts it, in suitably unflinching style: 'The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion.'

The significance of the fire and its uncertain illumination is that, for the easily-duped prisoner marvelling at the first stage of his liberation, it is a rival source of light and a very tempting source of comfort. As Murdoch explains:

> There are false suns, easier to gaze upon and far more comforting than the true one ... Plato has given us the image of

this deluded worship in his great allegory ... when [the prisoners in the cave] turn round they can see the fire, which they have to pass in order to get out of the cave. The fire, I take it, represents the self, the old unregenerate psyche, that great source of energy and warmth. The prisoners in [this] the second stage of enlightenment have gained the kind of self-awareness which is nowadays a matter of so much interest to us ... They see the flames which threw the shadows which they used to think were real, and they can see the puppets, imitations of things in the real world ... They do not yet dream that there is anything else to see ... The fire may be mistaken for the sun, and self-scrutiny taken for goodness. (5)

Here Murdoch stokes the fire in the cave with more significance than Plato, identifying it more closely with the self and highlighting its potency and resourcefulness as a deceiver. She also alludes to the modern purveyors of 'self-awareness', especially those based on corrupted versions of Freud's teachings. To understand the self, according to popular notions*, is to master it and realise its full potential for happiness and success in life. But Murdoch is much more cautious, and in fact refers the reader back to the fastidious view of the self which Freud actually took in his writings:

> Freud takes a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tisue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings ... The problem is to accomodate inside moral philosophy, and suggest methods of dealing with the fact that so much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind. In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego. (6)

Self-scrutiny is revealed as a dangerous direction for the gaze to take. Instead, what goodness requires is an *outwardly* directed gaze.

The dynamic fluctuations of the quest, and the deceptive nature of the self seem to mark down the human condition as a hopelessly flawed one. Indeed Murdoch is extremely sceptical about the possiblity of our achieving any sustained proximity to the good life. However, many of Murdoch's characters manage to transcend their own selves in brief surges or flashes of insight, though in fact it might be better to call them flashes of 'outsight', since that describes the characteristic movement of vision.

In a survey of these characters who fleetingly experience the possibility of goodness it should be noted that their previous experiences of goodness follow no general pattern. One might suppose

that characters who regularly and genuinely try to move up and out of the cave, to shift the direction of their gaze from inner to outer, would regularly experience moments of transcendence; and that characters who never bother to make any effort at enlightenment, or are not even aware of the concept, would never be granted such grace. But it is important to appreciate just how democratically spread these moments are in Murdoch's fiction. Theo Gray, for example, in The Nice and the Good, is passionately devoted to the quest for goodness, and yet he only ever manages one terrifying glimpse of what he calls 'the other face of love' (7), from which he instantly retreats. Whereas there are a number of characters more casually embarked, for example John Ducane in the same book, or Charles Arrowby in The Sea, The Sea, and yet more characters not at all embarked, such as Morgan in A Fairly Honourable Defeat and Effingham Cooper in The Unicorn, who experience moments of transcendence just as intense as Theo's. A habit of selflessness is enjoined in Murdoch's writings generally, but it comes with no guaranteee of success: the sudden breakthrough can happen to anyone at any time: the process is entirely democratic.

In fact the ending of The Good Apprentice seems to highlight this openness. The three characters may be from a narrow social grouping, but in terms of the quest, as I explained earlier, they cover the spectrum of moral ambition, and their toast to unnamed and perhaps unnameable things seems to open the field right out to all comers.

Some critics* of Murdoch's work seem to have lost sight of the three fundamental characteristics of the quest for goodness which I have outlined above: its dynamic aspect, the power of the self as deceiver, and the way it is open to all comers regardless of their backgrounds or what we might be tempted to assess as their 'aggregate goodness' at any given moment. Murdoch, on the other hand, seems to hold these fundamentals very clearly in her mind when she writes.

What we do see, however, in the history of Murdoch's publishing career, is not any relaxation of her grip on these basics, but a change of interest from one area of the cave to another: from one stage of enlightenment to another. This does not mean that her *own* gaze as an author is any less democratic, in the sense of a meditated exclusion of certain characters on moral grounds, only that it dwells from book to book on some characters more than others, and that this preference shifts over her career. I shall say more about this change of interest in a later section, but first it is necessary to establish the link

between Murdoch's view of the self and her views on art, for these have important implications for the organisation of the thesis.

Plato distrusted artists and would have had them expelled from his Republic. He saw art in terms of imitation, and complained that the poets of his day abused their calling by portraying the gods as undignified or immoral, which, he argued, they could not be. Poets thus did mankind a diservice by peddling lies. But his criticism went deeper than individual failings, as his example of the bed-painter shows. From the eternal* Form or Idea of the bed, of which a vague notion still persists in the world, the carpenter will make his copy of a three-dimensional bed. The painter will then come along and make a one-dimensional copy of that copy. Thus art always lies in the direction of imitation and imperfection. To sum up Plato's example, the carpenter makes his bed and the painter lies about it.

Residual traces of the Forms, said Plato, survive in the souls of men, which souls, when newly minted, were within clear view of those Forms. But cycles of incarnation have blunted the recollection of the soul. Some revival of this original knowledge is possible, and in fact this is what the good carpenter struggles to do when he makes his bed.# It might be supposed that the soul of the artist would be at least as open to recollection as the soul of the carpenter, but Plato thought otherwise. Because art was in collusion with pleasure, it became a dangerous caricature of recollection. Whereas the carpenter was at least producing something useful, art, in these terms, had little justification.

In The Fire and the Sun Murdoch distinguishes between the bad artist, the naive fantasist who, too lazy to try to see the world as it is, would simply redraw it in his own image, and the good artist who strives to bypass his self-consoling, image-making ego, and to give back a true account of the world. This neo-Platonic conception of art is at times hard to follow, for the scope of art is extended well beyond mere imitation, into the figurative and even abstract realms, where it would at first seem ill-equipped to go. However, a passage from The Fire and the Sun, which directly draws upon the cave parable, clarifies the basic idea and its implications for the moral life:

> The bad artist (who resides in all of us) ... sees only moving shadows and construes the world in accordance with the easy unresisted mechanical 'causality' of his personal dream-life ... The mediocre artist (the ironical man by the fire, if we may so characterise him), who thinks he 'knows himself but too well', parades his mockery and spleen as a despairing dramatic rejection of any serious or just attempt to discern real order

at all. This figure ... is on the road toward the 'all is permitted' and 'man is the measure of all things' of the cynical sophist ... Good art, thought of as symbolic force rather than statement, provides a stirring image of a pure transcendent value, a steady visible enduring higher good, and perhaps provides for many people, in an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, their clearest *experience* of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and unpossessively in the attention ... Beauty is, as Plato says, visibly transcendent; hence indeed the metaphor of vision so indispensable in discussions of aesthetics and morality ... Good art ... provides work for the spirit. (8)

Notice the universality of the image: we are all bad artists and all seduced by the shadow-play in the cave; we are all puppeteers and audience at once; all artists and consumers of our art. The people who progress as far as the fire, supposing themselves full initiates, become self-conscious but not *world*-conscious. The kind of language used here - 'mechanical "causality"', 'despairing dramatic rejection' and 'man is the measure' - allude to systems of thought which, according to Murdoch, effectively rob the individual of a sense of connectedness with his world.* These ideologies are behaviourism, existentialism and utilitarianism, of which the most glamorous is existentialism.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to enter on a full description of these systems and their implications, which in any case has been well covered elsewhere#, but suffice it here to say that Murdoch regards them as generating a distorted image of the world in which the individual, though responsible for his actions, is otherwise free of constraint. Murdoch pictures this valued-for-action modern man as an overgrown schoolboy run amok in a proprietorless sweet-shop, free to choose, but paralysed for choice because all his actions, lacking this essential connectedness, ultimately lack meaning.

The distortions produced by ideology, whether philosophical, political or religious, which seek to 'reorganise chaos in accordance with one's own excellent plan' (9), are analogous to the self-consoling, fantasy-ridden creations of the bad painter or writer. What is required are those self-transcending, other-based, valued-for-vision impulses which are themselves accessible through good art. In these terms art becomes 'a special discerning exercise of intelligence in relation to the real' (10).

Murdoch is here championing formlessness, and in terms of her art this means free characters, unfettered by ideology or any other 'excellent plan' of her own. And yet this in itself could be seen as a kind of ideology. We are reminded of J M Keynes' remark that economists

who claimed they were theory-free were simply in the grip of an older theory.* And in practice Murdoch emerges as a fine plotter, and often produces highly structured fictions, for example A Severed Head and A Word Child.

Furthermore, art itself is frequently assumed to be *about* shaping, about *form*. This assumption rises clearly to the surface, for example, in Elizabeth Dipple's comment about An Unofficial Rose. Because the central character, Ann Peronett, is seen to lack a 'structure and machinery of the self' which might 'give form to the personality ... there is an inescapable contradiction in making Ann a major character and hingeing the whole novel's organisation on her.' (11)

Here we have the makings of an insoluble paradox. Art is about form, and yet goodness and good art, in Murdochian terms, are very much anti-form. With this in mind I have organised the thesis in a way which deliberately reflects this paradox.

The cave myth is implicitly, and often explicitly, present through most of Murdoch's output, and it is a structure she frequently plays with in a self-conscious fashion - in fact it seems to be the existence of the paradox which draws Murdoch back again and again to the cave. Furthermore it is a model consisting of two sets of properties.

Firstly, it is a model composed of a set of familiar oppositions: from darkness to light, from inner to outer, from earth to sky, from illusion to reality, and, in the case of the fire-sun opposition, from human to cosmic scale. These versatile, unspecific poperties offer a rich language in which to discuss the related though slightly less familiar opposition which is central to Murdoch's intention in employing the cave myth: the movement from self to other.

Secondly, and more importantly, the myth possesses a number of properties which point directly to aspects of Murdoch's work, not properly grasped by some critics, which are the subject of this thesis. As outlined above, these include the dynamic aspect of the pilgrimage - the fact that any progress made towards the light can be undone in a moment; the deceptive aspect - the idea that the self is a phenomenal concealer and protector of its own interests; and the democratic aspect - a reaction to an elitist strain of criticism that seeks to divide the world into saints and sinners.

The crucial justification for using the myth is thus twofold. Firstly, discussion of a system which is dynamic, deceptive and

democratic, *within a model* which implies stasis, straightforwardness and elitism gives the form versus formlessness paradox - which is vital to a proper understanding of Murdoch's work - a high profile. And secondly, highlighting the paradox in this way also draws attention to the pitfalls, outlined above, of which some previous commentators on Murdoch have fallen foul.*

Linked to an examination of these three specific properties is the tackling of a critical argument which has recently come to light - and which is further complicated by each fresh Murdoch publication - as to where exactly the centre of interest is in the cave: does she side with those timid souls who huddle round the fire, or does she favour those bold adventurers who strike out on the hard pilgrimage to the one true sun?

With these aims in mind, the structure of the thesis will follow the stages of the Platonic pilgrimage out of the cave and into the light.

Accordingly, Chapter One will discuss A Word Child and The Sea, The Sea in the context of stage one of the pilgrimage (deep cave-dwelling), but will concentrate upon Murdoch's comic play with the neglected dynamic aspect of the journey. Chapter Two will take a fresh look at A Severed Head, The Black Prince and The Sacred and Profane Love Machine. Their contribution to stage two of the pilgrimage (by the fire) will be revised to emphasise the sometimes underestimated power of the self as a cunning deceiver. Chapter Three will argue that reading The Bell, An Unofficial Rose and Nuns and Soldiers in terms of stage three (the ascent of the cave) makes clear the truly democratic basis of the pilgrimage. Chapter Four will build on the careful elucidation of the specific properties of the myth demonstrated in the three previous chapters to show the hazards of stage four (the brink of the sunlit land). The discussion, featuring The Nice and the Good, Bruno's Dream and Henry and Cato, will concern which denizens of the cave - the fire or the sun-worshippers - Murdoch has most sympathy for, and whether this sympathy has been changing through her publishing career. Chapter Five will review The Philosopher's Pupil and The Good Apprentice in terms of the final stage of the pilgrimage (return to the cave) and comment on a 'new' strain of optimism which is detectable in Murdoch's fiction. This chapter, since it is partly by way of an overview of Murdoch's total output, will also assess the impact of the novels as total artefacts. The thesis will conclude with Chapter Six, concentrating on Murdoch's newest (post 1985) work, trying to put it in the context of work being done by other contemporary fiction writers, particularly Brian Moore,

Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood, and will argue that her latest work is degenerating into the formless 'journalistic'* style which her earlier pronouncements deplore.

But before embarking upon this journey into a journey it is first necessary to look in some detail at the history of what has already been said about Murdoch, for it is the successes and failiures of this much-revised travelogue which have helped shape what I am about to say. As might be supposed, because she is a long-established writer, critical attitudes towards her work have had time to crystallise, dissolve and reform, and in fact are still undergoing change. Also, innovatory approaches in critical theory in the last decade, notably in the field of feminism, have tended to accelerate those changes.

Iris Murdoch's first novel, Under the Net, was published in 1954. The book was a popular and critical success and she became, odd though it seems to us today, classed with the Young Angries of the time, writers like John Wain and Kingsley Amis, and in fact the rootless, picaresque hero of Under the Net, Jake Donaghue, does bear some resemblance to Jim Dixon, the hero of Lucky Jim, which was published in the same year. Subsequent novels - she was and is a prolific writer, publishing at the rate of approximately one book every eighteen months - seemed to confuse and sometimes repel critics and readers alike#. Her inventiveness, descriptive and story-telling skills were never in doubt, but she was often criticised for what was regarded as the intrusion of philosophical ideas, for example the eponymous net of Wittgenstein in Under the Net, and the discussion of the function of art in The Sandcastle (1957).

The presence in the novels of philosophical ideas seems inevitable in someone with major interests in that field: she taught philosophy at Oxford, and continues to write books on the subject. In 1953, the year before Under the Net appeared, she published a book about Sartre (11a). However, the reception of those ideas as they appear in her *fiction* has been varied, and the blanket criticism is that the novels are 'too clever, too cerebral, too slick, too pretentious' (12).

It was against this background that the first substantial critical study of Iris Murdoch's fiction appeared. This was A S Byatt's book Degrees of Freedom (1965). Byatt takes as her starting point a short article by Murdoch, 'Against Dryness', in which Murdoch argues that our scientific and anti-metaphysial age has robbed us of the full range of

concepts necessary to adequately describe the individual. Modern philosophy has connived with science so that 'we have been left with far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality' (13). An amalgam of Anglo-Saxon and French philosophy has, Murdoch argues, given us a picture of modern man as an isolated will, totally free and totally responsible for his actions. There being no god, modern man is the arbiter of all meaning, so that nothing transcends him. Murdoch counters that picture with this statement:

> We need to be enabled to think in terms of degrees of freedom, and to picture, in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian, and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality. A simple-minded faith in science, together with the assumption that we are all rational and totally free, engenders a dangerous lack of curiosity about the real world, a failure to appreciate the difficulties of knowing it ... We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons ... We need a new vocabulary of attention. (14)

Byatt's analysis of the early novels in terms of 'degrees of freedom' is a productive standpoint. These novels, Byatt points out, usually contain one or more characters attempting to make some kind of bid for freedom, such as Bill Mor in The Sandcastle, and Randall Peronett in An Unofficial Rose, both struggling to leave their wives and families for younger women. Often the world described in the novels is a predatory one, such as in The Flight from the Enchanter, where all human affairs - work, education and personal relationships - seem to exist only for the purposes of enslavement; or as in The Unicorn, which is markedly about isolation and imprisonment. Sometimes the source of enslavement may be called *external*, such as the oppression caused by the competitive nature of success in any field - aspects of The Flight from the Enchanter fall into this category - but more often the source is *internal*, that is to say, the characters are under the influence of self-generated ideas or obsessions which obscure the reality which is naturally there. These ideas and obsessions are the self-delusions which rush in to fill the vacuum left by 'our dangerous lack of curiosity about the real world' and our failure to recognise the 'opacity of persons', that is to say their dense, complex, mysterious natures.

Very often, Byatt observes, the characters agonise over the *choices* facing them, choice being a looming feature in the stripped landscape of

the solitary will embracing its own freedom. *Inward* scrutiny of the wants of the self thus becomes the popular definition of freedom. Murdoch redefines freedom in terms of an *outward* scrutiny involving a language of attention derived from Simone Weil. In her non-fiction this is clearly expressed as follows:

> Virtue is not essentially or immediately concerned with choosing between actions, or rules, or reasons ... It is concerned with really apprehending that other people exist. This too is what freedom really is. (15)

In the fiction, Byatt reveals, the sense of Murdoch's definition of freedom is conveyed through the experience of the characters, where their self-generated, ordered views of the world are shown to be at odds with life as it really is. Such a case is Jake Donaghue in Under the Net, who. like Roquentin in Sartre's La Nausea , requires everything in his life to have 'sufficient reason' (16) and is nauseated by the 'contingency' of much of what he sees. His experience forces him to relax the 'pattern' he sees in relationships about him, and the measure of his reform is shown at the end of the book when Mrs Tinkham asks him to explain why her cat's offspring should have the particular set of markings which they do have: 'It's just a matter of ...' (17), he begins, and then cannot go on, but is at least able to rejoice in the contingent mystery of the process involved. Similarly, in An Unofficial Rose, the clarity and separateness of the new life Randall decrees for himself with his mistress is denied by his actual *experience* of the break with his wife*. Time and again the connectedness of the characters seems to defy their wills. Action and choice become illusory.

Byatt's first achievement is to systematically describe the freedom-connection debate in each of the seven Murdoch novels available at that time, and to relate that debate to Murdoch's non-fictional statements. The discussion of freedom, says Byatt, also identifies goodness. Goodness exists where there is Murdochian freedom to disregard the self and apprehend others: characters are 'good' when they attempt to foster this kind of freedom. But Byatt is also careful to point out how very ambiguous goodness can appear when defined in these terms. Ann Peronett, the most 'good' character of An Unofficial Rose, seems to have, in some way, a corrupting effect on those about her. She fails to *radiate* her quality of goodness, but instead becomes a sort of *hole* in the proceedings, a 'vacuum into which their blame ran' (18). Byatt

describes Ann's position as scapegoat, and points out the paradox that her curious negativity comes to look like a kind of evil (19).

Byatt's second achievement is to connect Murdoch's idea of freedom with her thoughts about art. The withdrawal of the personality which permits goodness in life also, it emerges, permits goodness in art:

> Art is not an extension of personality, it is a question rather of the continuing expelling of oneself from the matter in hand ... the artist is indeed the analogon of the good man, and in a special sense he is the good man: the lover who, nothing himself, lets others be through him. (20)

Byatt traces this line of thought through 'Against Dryness', where Murdoch argues that the modern novel suffers from the intrusion of the writer's personality, which intrusion tends to show itself in one of two ways. Either the characters in the novel are rigidly defined by the presence of a myth-like structure, or they become submerged in a welter of details which are treated with equal significance - what Murdoch calls the 'crystalline' and 'journalistic' styles respectively (21). Either way, as Henry James expressed it, the novel ceases to be 'a home fit for free characters to live in' (22). What is required is some sort of middle way, something resembling the approach taken by the great nineteenth-century novelists such as Dickens and George Eliot, and, for Byatt, Murdoch is the novelist of our age most genuinely concerned to find that middle way. (23)

Of course, in setting such a high standard of fiction, Murdoch as a novelist could be placing herself in something of a glasshouse, vulnerable to the accusation that her own fiction suffers from these very faults, and Byatt criticises some of the novels in just these terms. At the 'crystalline' end of the scale she places <u>The Unicorn</u>:

> We do not for a moment believe in Hannah's sufferings ... It all remains an *idea* - Iris Murdoch tells us that Hannah suffers and then proceeds to build philosophical patterns ... which refer outside the novel for [their] meaning ... we have the key only when we have read Simone Weil. (24)

And at the 'journalistic' end Byatt places <u>An Unofficial Rose</u>, where she diagnoses Murdoch as being 'in the grip of the theory that there should be no theory' (25), and of being 'so obsessed with the expunging of the self from the work of art ... that she does not, *as a writer*, inhabit her action with the vigour that she should' (26). I shall come back to this point again, particularly in the final chapter, when I discuss the latest Murdoch novels, where I feel that a deliberate leaning towards a 'journalistic' style is having important consequences.

Byatt's work, coming as it does near the start of Murdoch's career, is, understandably, heavily influenced by the nearby presence of Murdoch's book on Sartre, which contains an attack on the existentialist notion of freedom. Later critics have the considerable advantage of more Murdoch novels to draw on, but also the increasing interest which she later reveals in Plato's notion of goodness and his attitude to art.

Frank Baldanza, in his book Iris Murdoch (1974), is able to work from a broader selection of novels - The Black Prince was published the year before - but has the double advantage of the availability of Murdoch's philosophical work The Sovereignty of Good (1970), which describes her positive source of inspiration. The impression, persisting since Degrees of Freedom, of Murdoch as an anti-existentialist writer, is finally overlaid by the more significant fact of her specifically pro-Platonic interest.

In The Sovereignty of Good Murdoch gives an account of the path to goodness being an attempt to overcome illusion and selfish fantasy and replace it with a careful discipline of attending to reality. She pictures the endeavour in terms of Plato's cave myth: of the benighted prisoner in the cave escaping his bond and attempting the difficult ascent to the sunlit land beyond the cave mouth. In these terms, reaffirming what she said in 'The Sublime and Beautiful Revisited', art and morals are thus shown to be 'two aspects of a single struggle' (27) - the apprehension of reality. As explained earlier, Murdoch is neo-Platonic in asserting the value of good art, explaining that 'the appreciation of beauty in art or nature is ... the easiest available spiritual exercise' (28).

Baldanza draws on this insight in his analysis of the novels as being often 'a struggle between two men, an artist and a saint' (29). He also detects, in The Nice and the Good - novel number eleven - the beginnings of a shift of interest in the fiction:

> While Iris Murdoch has for a long time insisted that love is her primary subject, she says ... she was more strongly preoccupied in her earlier works with freedom; now, however, 'what I am concerned about really is love'. (30)

Love, as exemplfied in the novels, is often shown to be a cruel enslaver, but in its purer forms it is a great revealer of the world: 'Love is knowledge of the individual' (31).

Building on the work of Byatt and Baldanza, Elizabeth Dipple produced a large book, Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit (1982). Dipple has a longer shelf of texts to work with. In the fiction she has the novels

up to Nuns and Soldiers (1980) - number twenty - to draw on, plus Murdoch's philosophical work The Fire and the Sun (1977), in which she restates her neo-Platonic leanings and elaborates on her thoughts about the cave. Dipple, in fact, takes the title of her book from a passage in The Fire and the Sun: 'Good art ... provides work for the spirit.' (32) Dipple continues to elucidate the saint versus artist debate, and detects another growing interest in Murdoch's work, the notion of death as the ultimate step in the process of unselfing (33), and also the false unselfing which suffering so often represents. Dipple repeatedly emphasises the extreme difficulty of apprehending goodness - the 'true centre' of the novels - and remarks that so many of the pointers seen on the road leading out of the cave turn out to be misleading. Speaking in particular of Nuns and Soldiers she says:

> In fact the three rejected elements ... God, philosophy* ... and at-homeness in the world - all appear as powerful, even overwhelming forces which, like the bourgeoise content, distract attention from the true centre. (34)

Murdoch too warns of the steepness of the ascent, but she does *not*, I feel, reject the notion of at-homeness - our ability to feel comfortable in the world - as a 'distraction'. Rather, the achievement of at-homeness plus some kind of intelligent assessment and gradual bettering of one's own spiritual health is the realistic task presented to the characters in the novels. As Michael Mead remarks in The Bell (1958):

> One must perform the lower act which one can manage and sustain: not the higher act which one bungles. (35)

Peter Conradi, in his book The Saint and the Artist (1986), takes up this point when he criticises Dipple for her asceticism, her tendency to act like a 'moral terrorist conducting a series of ethical unmaskings and denunciations on the characters'. The result, he says, is that Dipple sometimes 'shows a Calvinism wholly at odds with Iris Murdoch's own generosity' (36). He turns the emphasis away from the requirements of asceticism and towards a recognition of the presence in many of Murdoch's characters of 'spiritual pride' (37) - of their vain desire to live outside their spiritual means. A level of irony operates against these characters, says Conradi, which resembles that employed by, for example, Jane Austen and George Eliot, against characters guilty of material snobbery - their vain desire to live outside their social or financial means. Conradi points out that, in approaching a state of goodness and recognising the otherness of people, Murdoch is always warning against violent unselfing, which often results in a pointless

destruction of personality. Conradi calls this a 'too sudden decentring' (38) and says (perhaps consciously alluding to Byatt) that what Murdoch argues for are 'degrees of unselfing' (39).

In these terms then, God and philosophy become the peripheral, 'distracting' issues, while the notion of 'at-homeness in the world' is, I feel, rightfully restored by Conradi to being a central and absorbing interest in the novels.

Richard Todd in Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearean Interest (1979), like Conradi, stresses Murdoch's generosity for her characters, and relates it to the wide tolerance which Shakespeare shows in his plays (40). He also places Murdoch's comic vision and her notion of realism in fiction in the context of this Shakespearean tolerance.

Angela Hague investigates Murdoch's status as a comic novelist in her book Iris Murdoch's Comic Vision (1984). She begins with a brief resume of the difficult subject of comic theory, then tests those theories against a range of the novels to show Murdoch's versatility, and how it is imposssible to tie her down to one particular theory, and finally gives an in-depth discussion of three of the later novels in terms of the most appropriate of those theories.

Deborah Johnson, in her book Iris Murdoch (1987), approaches the novels from a feminist point of view. She takes as her starting point Murdoch's own statement that 'It is a freer world that you are in as a man than a woman' (41). This inequality, Johnson claims, results from a tendency of the male characters to become inflated by what they see as their own life-dramas. They often become, like Hilary Burde in A Word Child and Bradley Pearson in The Black Prince, questing heroes. This is an old idea but Johnson gives it a new twist by comparing this 'predominantly male activity' with a closer look at the activity of female characters in Murdoch's novels who 'are often given the role of undermining (comically or tragically) these sustaining fictions' (42). The male activities of adventure and articulateness are thus opposed by the female activities of passivity and silence. From this standpoint, and supported by statements from Murdoch, Johnson produces a very interesting definition of goodness, which also illuminates the saint-artist debate:

> Goodness (the generously disinterested awareness of the world outside the self) then becomes linked with silence and, even more revealing, with femaleness: 'goodness appears to be both rare and hard to picture. It is perhaps most convincingly met with in simple people - inarticulate unselfish mothers of large families - but these cases are also the least illuminating'. (43)

Johnson's best work comes when she is descibing the novels with this insight in mind. Where she is less convincing is when she uncritically brings in the ideas of French feminist Luce Irigaray, and her re-reading of Plato's cave myth

> to reverse in minute detail the nexus of metaphors present in the parable to show their applicability to the privileging of male systems of representation in Western philosophical discourse. (44)

This analysis is weak, I feel, because it is based upon Irigaray's misreading of the cave myth in order to, as it were, repossess it for her own ends. However, I shall deal with this more fully in Chapter Three.

Armed with the above insights into the growing body of Murdoch criticism it is now possible to examine in detail and reappraise those features of the cave myth - its dynamic, deceptive and democratic aspects - which are the true focus of this thesis.

> Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remained in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets ... See also, then, men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well ... in every way prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of the artificial objects. (1)

'An odd picture and an odd sort of prisoner', interjects one of Socrates' politely sceptical interlocutors after hearing this tale of fetters and puppets. And indeed this combination of lifelong incarceration and elaborate confidence trick may seem to have little bearing on our twentieth-century consciousness, borne along on a tide of crumbling totalitarian governments and rising individual freedom. But Socrates isn't talking about that kind of liberty. Instead he is trying to picture for his listeners the moral and intellectual condition of the average man. In this sense the chains and the shadow-play are not something that is done to you by some fiendish unseen manipulator, but something you do to yourself, or rather, a handicap we are all born into without being aware of. In Plato's cosmogony, then, our imprisonment is like a kind of Original Sin, which we bear all our lives; though the negative Christian charge of guilt, the curse on Adam's children, is replaced in this case by a positive yearning for the sunlit land, the land where goodness is sovereign, which the myth goes on to describe and of which our immortal souls retain a faint memory:

> PLATO: Our home is elsewhere and it draws us like a magnet.
> SOCRATES: Our home may be elsewhere, but we are condemned to exile, to live here with our fellow exiles. (2)

I stress this notion of our imprisonment being an eternal condemnation, a permanent brand we carry with us, because a superficial reading of the myth suggests that our exile can be broken *permanently* by a few startling insights into our condition, bringing 'our home', the sunlit land, within a few energetic footsteps. Whereas, as this and subsequent chapters will be anxious to point out, there is something essentially *alien* about the sunlit land: we do not, in the human sense, belong there - it is only our non-human moiety, our soul, which calls to that far-off place - and our access

to it is very limited and very temporary. It is in this sense that I use the word *dynamic*: the 'magnetic' pull which the distant sun exerts on our souls being more than balanced by the massive inertia of our earth-bound corporeality; so that, most of the time, morally and intellectually speaking, we go nowhere, merely kicking our heels in the dark, snug and entertaining recesses of the cave.

If, when put alongside our modern understanding of the human mind, Plato's image of the human condition still does not seem viable, then some small modifications - to what Plato stressed was not meant to be taken literally - will help:

> As Cornford pointed out, the best way to understand the simile is to replace 'the clumsier apparatus' of the cave by the cinema ... though clearly the average man knows the difference between substance and shadow in the physical world, the simile suggests that his moral and intellectual opinions often bear as little relation to the truth as the average film does to real life. (3)

A moment ago I mentioned 'entertaining recesses', and Cornford's substitution helps make clear where the active centre of our darkness lies, for our benighted existence is not something we passively suffer, like a torture chamber, but a process which in some way we actively collude in: like a cinema or playgoer who, with a good seat in the stalls, is at the same time able to be actor and director in the drama he watches. These filmic or theatrical terms suggest something of the complexity of the transactions, the suspensions of disbelief, that must take place in the human mind under quite normal stimuli: the ingenious machinations of the 'fat relentless ego' (4) which Iris Murdoch refers to in her gloss of Freud.

It is not my intention here to define the components of the psyche, or describe the *functioning of the ego in relation to its other parts*, but I shall use Murdoch's loose Freudian terminology in which, notably,

> Freud ... sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. (5)

Rather than strain for definitions herself, Murdoch sees moral philosophy's great challenge as being to find a language rich enough to somehow accommodate intact that rag-bag of a definition of the psyche.

The question of moral philosophy brings us back to the notion of goodness. Plato essentially equates goodness with wisdom: if we could see and understand more of what goes on in the cave, then we could be better men and women leading better lives. But he points out that our capacity for wisdom is constantly undermined by contesting forces in our natures.

The American psychotherapist Thomas Harris acknowledges the perverse consequences of this contest for human learning in an anecdote. An old farmer receives an enthusiastic lecture on soil conservation and innovative techniques from a young, university-educated man selling farming manuals:

> After a polite and polished speech the young man asked the farmer if he would like to buy this new book, to which the old man replied,
>
> 'Son, I don't farm half as good as I know how already.' (6)

This expresses not merely the customary rivalry between town and country, or between old and young, or even a latent resistance to the education process itself, but a wry admission of, as Harris calls it, the ancient puzzle as to 'why people do not live as good as they know how already'. Or, to put it another way, why do the denizens of the cave seem to cling to their shadow-play even when they have evidence of its fakery?

Without at all departing from the spirit of Plato's original parable, Murdoch exploits its cinematic and theatrical elements in her own writing. In her novels, the result is often a species of articulate first-person narrator who can speak of his yearning for goodness while at the same time unconsciously displaying the kind of perverse loyalty seen in Harris's farmer.

The danger is that we could end up with characters engaged in tedious soap-box philosophising, but Murdoch overcomes this problem by having her narrators express their yearnings and perverse retreats in terms natural to them which yet manage to echo the Cave, rather than in 'philosophic' vocabulary. So that, for instance, in <u>The Sea,The Sea</u> (1978), we have Charles Arrowby, a retired actor and theatre director, talking us through his dynamic moral fluctuations in the language of the theatre. Charles's status as an artist is thus automatically linked to his moral progress.

What emerges is a psychologically convincing picture of what could be called the deep cave-dwelling mind: the potent unregenerate psyche which has yet to seize upon an awareness of itself. What I wish to draw particular attention to in this chapter is Murdoch's comic play with the dynamics of the journey towards enlightenment which lies ahead, for those dynamics have been largely misunderstood by the critics*.

In <u>The Sea, The Sea</u>, Charles, while attempting to write his memoirs, describes the process of self-exploration as a journey through a dark cavern

> where there are various 'lights', made perhaps by shafts or apertures which reach to the outside world ... There is among those lights one great light towards which I have been half-consciously wending my way. It may be a great 'mouth' opening to the daylight, or it may be a hole through which fires emerge from the centre of the earth. And I am still unsure which it is. (7)

Charles is not consciously aware of the Platonic Cave myth here, he ingenuously hits upon this way of describing his so-far leisurely and fairly aimless venture into self-exploration as it is naturally suggested to him by his earlier observation that 'Actors are cave-dwellers in a rich darkness which they love and hate' (8), and by his Prospero-like ambition to 'abjure magic' - Prospero was a cave-dweller too - and by the cave-riddled stretch of coastline he has chosen to retire to. A guiding principle, the 'one great light', now begins to emerge from the battery of other 'lights'. Charles admits to not knowing where this light comes from - is its origin 'daylight', or does it come from underground, from a hell-fire source? There are several clues here. The recollection of Hartley seems to have about it the 'smell of fire and brimstone' (9), and the cave 'mouth', which might in another context be the threshold of a Platonic landscape illuminated by the reality-giving sun of Good, in this context sounds suspiciously like the mouth of the sea-monster which shattered Charles's meditative calm on the very first page of his memoirs, and which continues to haunt him. Charles has been at pains to rationalise away this 'hallucination', eventually attributing its appearance to an earlier bad LSD trip. A more likely explanation, but one he does not think of till much later, is that the sea-monster is actually a manifestation of his unstable unconscious - the 'demon of jealousy' (10) he confesses to be his constant companion - surfacing into his conscious mind. The feeling of horror which accompanied the LSD trip is the same, he reports, as that which he associates with the sea-monster: 'it concerned entrails ... as if one's stinking inside had emerged and become the universe'. (11) The idea of insides emerging to pollute outsides is very significant. The passionate inside of Charles's mind is, as it were, in danger of spilling out into the more rational outer structures of his mind, just as the sudden appearance of an emotionally-charged figure from his past - Mary Hartley Smith - threatens to contaminate his meditative present.

Charles quickly comes to identify Hartley, his childhood love, with the 'one great light' in his 'cave' wanderings, and tells us that she is 'the most important thing in my life ... my end and my beginning, she is alpha and omega'. (12) Her early rejection of him has, he claims, 'ruined me

morally ... She was a part, an evidence, of some pure uncracked unfissured confidence in the good which was never there for me again.' (13) and explains his previous love affairs as spiteful attempts to show Hartley that she was right not to believe that he could remain faithful to her.

His love for Hartley and her rejection of him has, he leads us to believe, shaped his subsequent life, and the qualities he attaches to her - innocence and youth - are lost to him now, or rather, they are held in suspension for him, and when the ageing Hartley suddenly reappears in his life, those qualities, he believes, are there for him to redeem: she is to 'give me back my own best self'. (14)

From here on Charles's autobiography/diary shapes itself into an attempt to describe his life 'in the light of' this knowledge - 'The light in the cavern is daylight, not fire' (15), he decides - and when Hartley herself reappears, the autobiography evolves into a novel format, shaped by his revived love for her. The idea of illumination and emergent 'shapes' is very strong in The Sea,The Sea, but the reader is asked to carefully analyse these lights and shapes and to test them for real substance or mere shadow. For example, the very first time Charles sees the ageing Hartley* he does not recognise her. Speaking of recurrent 'shadows' of the lost Hartley, he says with unconscious irony:

> I still sometimes see these shadows, I saw one lately upon an old woman in the village, a transient look of her head placed like a mask upon somebody entirely different. (16)

That Charles's vision may be cloudy, and that he may be wrong about his 'guiding lights', mistaking inward, colonic, hell-like fire-flickers for outward, steady daylight, and that his plan to do 'real autobiography' (17) is beyond his ability, is a point commented on by his cousin, James:

> 'We are such inward secret creatures ... But we cannot just walk into the cavern and look around. Most of what we think we know about our minds is pseudo-knowledge ... The heroes at Troy fought for a phantom Helen, according to Stesichorus ... If even a dog's tooth is truly worshipped it glows with light.' (18)

Charles thinks he can range about in the cavern of his own psyche with impunity, but James's scepticism here parallels Murdoch's distrust of self-analysis in The Sovereignty of Good: 'Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason.' (19) James's cool commentary and the reference to a 'phantom Helen' alerts the reader to the dubiousness of Charles's thinking. Charles has already identified Hartley with Dante's Beatrice, claiming that 'all the goodness of my life seemed to reside there with her.' (20) The idea of one's goodness

being held in safekeeping by another individual is reminiscent of the attitude of Fred Vincy in George Eliot's Middlemarch. He feels guilt for his bad actions, but only through the person of Mary Garth. The narrator comments:

> 'The theatre of all my actions is fallen', said an antique personage when his chief friend was dead; and they are fortunate who get a theatre where the audience demands their best. (21)

Luckily, Mary cares how Fred behaves; Charles's problem, though he will not own it, is that his 'audience', Hartley, is now indifferent to the quality of his performance, a particularly infuriating fate for an ex actor/director. Thus Hartley is less of a Beatrice, with the Dantesque associations of purifying fire, and more of a 'phantom Helen', with Stesichorean associations of a vain and unnecessary war, which is very much the real quality of the campaign which Charles wages upon Hartley and her husband, and also approximates to his general attitude to theatre audiences: 'The theatre is an attack on mankind carried on by magic ... All this was part of my revenge.' (22) James's dog's tooth idea again calls into question the notion of light sources. The object - Hartley or Helen - is passive and irrelevant; it is the lover, not the beloved, who generates the energy: as Charles later admits, it is 'the light of our own self-satisfaction' (23).

That Charles's love object should have a pair of names is also significant. To Ben, her husband, she is 'Mary', a name with certain Christian associations; but to Charles she is 'Hartley', a name connected with the infinite process of association itself*, which process so influenced the Romantic poets. By the end of the novel Charles comes to see that his accumulated thoughts about Hartley, far from being a source of illumination, have the opposite effect, and now a darkness has come over his past: 'Anything can be tarnished by association, and if you have enough associations you can blacken the world.' (24)

In addition to the cave, a second major theme exists in The Sea, The Sea, and this is the quest. We have already seen how, in one sense, Charles is conducting a military campaign. Angela Hague carried out an interesting analysis of The Sea, The Sea to show how Murdoch exploits certain comic conventions originally described by Northop Frye and Francis Cornford. One of these conventions involves a romantic quest:

> According to Frye, the reward of the quest is frequently a bride, but the hero must go through a series of adventures or conflicts to win her; the most important form of the quest-romance is the dragon-killing theme, in which a kingdom ruled by a helpless old king is pillaged by a sea monster which the hero must kill. (25)

Charles very much sees himself in the role of the young hero, but also the old king too. However, as Hague points out, the effect is comic because Charles's presentation of himself does not square with how the reader perceives him. Charles is an 'alazon character ... an impostor or fool who pretends to be more than he really is' (26). He sees Hartley as his 'beggar maid' and himself as a 'king', but the generosity of this arrangement has a sour note to it because we detect Charles's sense of superiority:

> She did not have to join my grand intimidating alien world ... the king would, and how gladly too, become a beggar too. (27)

Contempt shows through again in the exterior mask of rationality he wears to protect himself from the curiosity of Rosina and the others: adopting their mocking tone towards the pursuit of Hartley he nicknames it 'The Quest of the Bearded Lady' (28), and dismisses her as 'just a boring old hag now' (29). However, he does pursue Hartley in terms of a romantic quest, and much of the ironic humour of the book results from the gap between this image and the atmosphere of cosy domesticity he enters. He casts himself in the role of Hartley's rescuer, though in fact he later imprisons her, and the 'tyrant' he is supposed to be rescuing her from, Ben Fitch, later turns out to be a war hero much respected by James. Waiting in the hallway of the Fitch home Charles notices a picture of a medieval knight, but the 'fortress' he storms is not a medieval castle overgrown with ivy and protected by a moat and heavy portcullis, but a bungalow called 'Nibletts'* with a clematis growing over the front door. Its formidability seems to reside in the energy with which it resists Charles's attempts to modify or soften its image of solid ordinary respectability:

> Other houses might be built upon sand or even made of sand, but not so Nibletts. The bricks are unchipped, sharp and uneroded at the corners. There is no moss upon the roof and one feels that none will ever grow there ... the blue front door ... is covered with very thick, very shiny paint. (30)

This 'invasion' scene is very funny, as the Fitches try to deal politely with their awkward guest. Some of the comedy is turned against Charles's latent snobbery, as when, despite his stated aim to 'become a beggar too', he arrives at the Fitches' expecting to be offered drinks, and fails to anticipate that this would be tea-time for Ben and Hartley; or it is turned against the generalised gap between the Fitch and Arrowby worlds, as with Ben's 'learning to rivet china' (31) seeming like an absurd and barbaric skill when set against James's delicate collection of 'have-worthy jade animals' (32) and priceless *objets d'art*.

But much more the comedy is evenly divided between Charles and the Fitches and stems from the incongruousness of a romantic way of thinking in the Nibletts setting: the Fitches had a cat named after Tamburlaine, that most insatiable of all fictional go-getters, but they have domesticated the name to 'Tambi' (33); Ben doesn't pour boiling oil over his arch-enemy, instead Charles trips over a rag rug Ben has made; Ben's boat building classes have degenerated into shelf-making, the romantic escape figured by a boat now reduced to less ambitious practical domesticity; and Charles's previous pyrotechnics at the theatre and current fiery passion for Hartley seem to be balanced by Ben's job as a seller of fire extinguishers.

Murdoch also uses inversions and duplications of Frye's analysis of the quest theme to produce humour and irony. We have already seen that the prize-winning adventure Charles undertakes is, in his own mind, the conflict between himself and 'tyrant' Ben. However, in the Murdochian sense of self-denial being the primary virtue, the 'tyrant' is really the 'sea-monster' of jealousy within Charles himself, but also within Ben too, so that the enemy to be fought becomes a generalised human failing.

The assumption in the Frye analysis is of course that the bride to be won is a maiden who may require rescuing and would in any case welcome the embrace of the hero. That Hartley is, by her own admission, a happily married woman who does not want to be rescued creates one level of irony. A second level is achieved in the dialectic concerning what Charles can possibly *know* about Hartley and her marriage. The ugly, monotonous marital row which Charles eavesdrops upon seems to say that Hartley is lying or mistaken about the state of her marriage. But *is* that what it says? And if so, what follows? When Charles admits the eavesdropping to Hartley - 'You can't pretend any more ... I know the truth!' (34) - the sense of shame the reader feels towards Charles's intrusion would seem to indicate that the only *true* thing about his knowledge is that his possessing it at all is a piece of obscene meddling. What seems to carry authority is the wisdom of James's pronouncement

> 'You say she's unhappy, most people are. A long marriage is very unifying, even if it's not ideal, and these old structures must be respected.' (35)

and the sense in which, as Rosina warns Charles, '[You] haven't any role here, you haven't any lines' (36). What seems to matter is the sheer weight of the past, of years of married life with Ben which make Charles's declarations of love seem flimsy, 'something childish' and not 'part of the real world' (37). In The Sandcastle, in which Bill Mor attempts to leave

his unsympathetic wife and escape into a new life with a younger woman, the same weight of past life - in this case his own married life - eventually makes action in the present impossible:

> The scene held him a prisoner, his wife's presence and her words pinned him to his chair, his whole previous life contained him like a straight-jacket. (38)

Similarly, in A Word Child, Hilary Burde is forced to point out to Kitty: 'You say you love me but what does it mean, what can it mean, reality rejects it.' (39)

The authority of a past not his own and the passage of time are what Charles has been resisting all along, literally in the way he lies to Hartley about how late it is in order to keep her at Shruff End (40), and also in the way his pursuit of her is an attempt to regain his youth.

In romance terms the Quest is a difficult but *decisive* act: the monster is overcome, the bride and hero are united, the old king revived. It is a magical and complete transformation. The strength of this novel is that its romantic infrastructure, as well as being a direct and believeable product of Charles's mind, is also joined seamlessly to a vividly described realistic world in which remorseless emotional and psychological forces have to be lived through in their agonising and inconclusive details.

In The Sea, The Sea the activity of being an artist was, for Charles, not compatible with 'abjuring magic'. Murdoch puts it thus:

> People persist in being artists against every possible discouragement and disappointment, because it is a marvellous activity, a gratification of the ego, and a free, omnipotent imposition of form; unless this is constantly being, as it were, pulled at by the value of truth, the artwork itself may not be as good and the artist may simply be using art as a form of self-indulgence ... This happens in art as well as in life. (41)

Experimenting with different forms, Charles quickly realises the potential of the novel form:

> If one had time to write the whole of one's life thus bit by bit as a novel how rewarding this would be ... sin and grief would be softened by a light of philosophic consolation. (42)

As Hague points out, Charles's 'verbalising his experiences is a way to control what is happening', and his switching from diary to novel form is 'related to his discovery that language can accomplish the same kind of deception and trickery that the theatre provided him as a theatrical director'. (43) In Murdoch's terms he is misusing art, using it to gratify his ego, as a route to power, to omnipotence, and as a piece of consoling self-indulgence. This artistic failing parallels his moral failing with

Hartley, for he has not tried to see her as she is, but rather as an organising centre in a consoling picture of his own life. As James points out, 'You have made it into a story, and stories are false' (44).

Towards the end of The Sea, The Sea, as Charles gains some wisdom, he gives up the novel and reverts to a diary form, and also endlessly revises many of what he thought were definitive statements about himself and other characters in the book, including the premise that Hartley was the 'one great light' (45) in his 'cave-wanderings' - he later concedes, in significantly less dramatic terms, 'Clement was the reality of my life' (46) - both changes being relaxations of control and attempts to see justly which are real moves towards the giving up of power he spoke of at the outset. This too has its comic aspect, for by the end of the book Charles has very little power in any case, it has all been taken away from him as his notoriety wanes: 'last night someone on a BBC quiz did not know who I was'. (47)

In A Word Child (1975) we see in Hilary Burde a different kind of artist at work. Like Charles Arrowby he is also a deep cave-dweller and a quester. Charles hoped to create an art-work, and Hilary is a word-smith too, but in his case the interest is not in writing but in language and grammar. Hilary's approach is pedantic and clinical, and the mastery of clear-cut language systems is his debased notion of 'goodness' (48). He conjugates the verb to love 'Amo, amas, amat' (49), but the word is stripped of meaning, and becomes merely a cypher in a battle to excel and so to raise himself from an 'outcast' (50) position of gauche, loveless, orphan poverty:

> I discovered words and words were my salvation. I was not, except in some very broken-down sense of that ambiguous term, a love-child. I was a word child. (51)

His job in the Civil Service, dealing with minor but complex pensions cases, affords him the opportunity to write 'elegant' memoranda (52). That these neat resolutions might appear insensitive to the recipients is highlighted later on when Hilary receives an equivalently unsympathetic response - ironically he loses his pension rights (53) - from his employers. But elegance and neat formal resolutions are Hilary's watchwords, and form the basis of his rather inhuman approach to the world. His inhuman or non-human qualities have three components: mechanical, animal and godlike. He is mechanical to the extent that he can describe himself accurately as 'a man on an assembly line' (54), animal in having 'a secret being as a black

animal' (55), and godlike to the point that he allocates 'days' (56) - in fact the novel is laid out according to these 'days' - to other people, seeing them only according to a rota which he institutes, like a deity granting audiences.

Peter Conradi points out that this makes Hilary into a kind of artist - in Murdoch's terms a bad one - in that he creates 'a small enclosed world whose meanings he tries wholly to legislate' (57), the standard of good art being, as Charles Arrowby admits, 'Shakespeare ... the place where magic does not shrink reality' (58). Some sense of Hilary's obsession with form and elegance, at the expense of the real issues, can be got from the letter he writes to Kitty Jopling. Ostensibly he is earnestly trying to repair the Gunnar-Anne smash-up, in which he was partly responsible for the death of Anne and her unborn child, but the document is also a kind of passionate love-letter to Kitty. But despite all this passion and earnestness he is still able to make several drafts:

> The first draft was full of colons and semicolons, which I excised in the second draft in favour of dashes, and then in subsequent drafts changed most of the dashes into commas and reinstated a colon or two. I noticed ... that I had scarcely mentioned Gunnar at all in draft one. (59)

An apprehension of form is also what attracts Hilary to the 'final solution' (60) Kitty proposes: that she should have a child by Hilary to replace the one that died. Both Hilary and Kitty are here so seduced by the idea of redeeming the past through the working out of this deep, self-justifying pattern that they fail to see in each other the 'real impenetrable human person' (61).

That this is a problem for the characters but not for Murdoch, that is to say, that she does not fall into the trap of writing a 'crystalline' novel (62), is a tribute to her writing skill. She creates a character, Hilary Burde, in the grip of a pattern which, as narrator, he is intelligent and articulate enough to be conscious of. Because we have had Hilary's history convincingly spelled out to us from 'incurably maimed' (63) childhood upwards, he is a believable character and we take the pattern of his paranoia to be psychologically convincing and stronger than his reason, so that we are interested to know where it will drive him. The sharpness and evident joy with which scenes are described, such as the snow-scene by the Peter Pan statue (64), the gratuitous-seeming glimpses of the tense humour of the office pecking-order, and the hinted-at richness of lives, such as Clifford Larr's, moving on the fringes of the tale, all seem like guarantees of truth and give a sense of a life 'pounding along like a

machine' (65) according to a pattern which is within the context of a novel all the time suggesting something *bigger* than the pattern. In other novels Murdoch achieves this sense of a wider context by the use of postscripts, as in The Black Prince, by characters within the novel who each take the opportunity to present their own version of the tale, or, as in An Accidental Man, by the interchange of letters or party-gossip by characters who never actually appear in the novel, or, in a negative fashion, as in The Time of the Angels, by the rumbling underground beneath the isolated rectory, which may or may not contain the never-met figure of Pattie's lost father.

The pattern of his paranoia does not quite drive Hilary into agreeing to Kitty's solution. He sees it to be unworkable and calls it off, but by this time it is too late and the cycle of disaster comes full circle with Kitty's death. A piece of wisdom comes to Hilary at this time, however, which is a critical recognition of the kind of artist he has been. He is comparing his bitter response to Anne's death, which cemented his paranoia, with his feelings after Kitty's death:

> Then I had raged at the accidental but had not let it in any way save me from my insistence upon being the author of everything. Now I saw my authorship more modestly and could perhaps move in time towards forgiving myself, forgiving them all. (66)

The easy versatility of the word 'authorship' shows how artistic integrity and morals are inseparable. He has, by a process of double-think, been able to believe that events were both accidental and determined at the same time. Now he is prepared to let more contingent details into the picture, to abandon the 'small enclosed world whose meanings he tries wholly to legislate' (67), and he does give up his system of 'days'. In fact something of a revolution occurs at the end of the book, with the last section being, as it were, allocated according to someone *else's* system of 'days': Christmas Day. This relaxation also resembles Charles Arrowby, as discussed earlier, reverting to a diary form at the end of The Sea, The Sea.

This recognition of moral/artistic failing parallels that which occurs to Dora Greenfield in The Bell when she sees the pictures in the National Gallery:

> It occurred to her that here at last was something perfect. Who said that, about perfection and reality being in the same place? Here was something which her consciousness could not wretchedly devour, and by making it part of her fantasy make it worthless. (68)

The pictures are a kind of touchstone for the real, and their uncorrupted power resides in their ability to remain outside her, to stay part of the uncorrupted world of non-self.

A changing attitude to 'authorship' also marks Hilary's response to the death of Clifford Larr. Although at first sight Hilary seems blameless here, a comparison with the deaths of Anne and Kitty reveals that the two women died from a combination of chance and being imperfectly loved, whereas Clifford died, not from chance, but from not being loved at all. As in the case of Mr Osmand, who dies while attempting to contact Hilary, there has been a failure of 'attention', the very quality which Mr Osmand originally gave to his ex-pupil: 'He gave me his full *attention*' (69):

> Clifford had died differently, he had died of being unloved and uncared for, as if the door had been shut upon him on a cold night* ... And after a while I began thinking about Mr Osmand,, and how he had died alone, and how he had once taught me out of Kennedy's Latin primer to conjugate the verb of love, his shabby sleeve pressing against my arm. (70)

That this activity of attention is a moral one, and intimately connected to the working of love, is confirmed in The Sovereignty of Good in the example of a mother (M) who manages to dislodge an unfavourable opinion which she holds about her daughter-in-law (D). She does this by discarding her preconceptions, her patterned way of thinking, and trying to see her daughter-in-law more clearly. Summing up the example, Murdoch says:

> I want here to connect two ideas: the idea of the individual and the idea of perfection. Love is knowledge of the individual. M confronted with D has an endless task ... The argument for looking outward at Christ and not inward at Reason is that self is such a dazzling object that if one looks *there* one may see nothing else ... Where virtue is concerned we ... grow by looking ... I have used the word 'attention', which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent. (71)

Murdoch's point applied to Hilary is that he failed to combine justice with the 'loving gaze' he directed upon Anne and Kitty, and Charles Arrowby's failure with Hartley was similar. In the case of Clifford and Mr Osmand, the gaze was neither just nor loving, it was simply not there, and Charles's regrets about the death of James are of the same order. Again, *vision* is the telling metaphor, and attention, love and justice are a chain of inseparable, *outward*-looking concepts whose application is a never-ending duty if we are to apprehend the reality of another human being.

We can see how far Hilary is from this state of 'perfection' if we examine what a thorough, almost literal, cave-dweller he is. When he is not at work, lurking near the bottom of the office hierarchy, or dozing at the cinema in a state of *eikasia* - Plato's word for the dreaming, fantasy-ridden cave-life - he spends much of his time at home 'in a sunless well' (72) in a bed which resembles an animal's lair, 'inhaling without displeasure the familiar badger smell' (73). This animal-like physical existence, of which his indiscriminate gobbling of messy foods is another example, is matched by his normal mental condition of animal unconsciousness:

> A talent for oblivion is a talent for survival. I laid my head down and merciful pain-killing sleep covered me fathoms deep*. Not to have been born is undoubtedly best, but sound sleep is second best. (74)

And in fact part of the narration is carried on 'while, as it were, I am asleep' (75).

Images of darkness, lights and caves proliferate in this book. Hilary's excelling in the examination system provided his initial 'road out of the pit' (76), and later on Kitty's intervention is supposed to enable him to 'climb out of the pit ... and see the light again' (77). His loving Kitty is, potentially at least, an improvement: without love, he notes, 'the scene is dark' (78). But the improvement is a very limited one, for in loving Kitty he develops what Conradi calls 'tunnel vision' (79) - concentrating his attention upon Kitty he completely isolates her and himself from the rest of the universe. Instead of being two unpredictable beings in a world of infinite possibilities, they become two self-sufficient pawns, 'alone in the bright dim snow-lit cave' (80), playing a small, dangerous game they have invented. He has merely exchanged one 'bright dim' cave - the contradictory adjectives calling into question Hilary's standard of reference - for another, this time one lit by the 'lurid life-sustaining radiance' (81) of his love for Kitty.

The surreptitious scenes on the darkened jetty above the freezing river intensify this feeling of blind isolation. When Hilary blunders out the information that Anne was pregnant when she died, his 'I felt now as if we were plunging around in the mud' (82) is an apt metaphor for their clumsy ignorance which also prefigures the final horrifying jetty scene where the verbal blunders become physical ones and Kitty falls into the mud and is lost to the icy cold river. That, as Matthew Gibson-Grey points out in An Accidental Man, 'the reality is huge and dark which lies beyond the lighted circle of our intentions' (83) is true of most of Hilary's thinking. He had,

for instance, in all the years since Anne's death, not seriously tried to imagine what Gunnar's state of mind might be:

> I had not imagined Gunnar as *brooding*. I had conceived of him as hating me, but I had pictured this hatred as something clean, hygienic, separate, and somehow essentially past, like a sharp knife put away for ever in a drawer. (84)

This description betrays how merely *instrumental* Gunnar's hatred has become in Hilary's picture of himself. Similarly, he had thought that 'the happiest day' of Crystal's life was attributable to her witnessing his success at the university, whereas it later emerges, ironically, that her happiness was caused by Gunnar being kind to her (85).

That Gunnar's name should evoke the cave drama in an earlier book, The Nice and the Good, is, I think, a deliberate ploy on Murdoch's part to mislead the reader. Hilary believes that Gunnar will be his necessary ordeal and the reader is similarly encouraged to locate the point of Hilary's reform here. In fact Hilary's reform has no particular point, in the sense of an act or movement he could make, but rather it requires a new way of looking and thinking. Crystal's speech to Gunnar, a quotation from the Bible, indicates what direction Hilary's reform might lie in: 'Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just ... think on these things' (86).

However, the most insistent image in the book, and one which cunningly combines both cave and animal characteristics, is Hilary making endless rat-like circuits of the Underground. The way Murdoch lovingly details these circuits, even providing information about which stations serve drinks and when, pushes the Inner Circle beyond being a crude symbol for the Freudian unconscious or the benighted Platonic psyche and into the realms of 'concrete metaphor' - a term of approval Conradi applies to such well-worked, insidious symbols as vision and the sea in The Sea, The Sea (87). Certainly there is an understated universality about the image of the 'underground life' which any attempt to label as a literary device reduces:

> Jammed body to body, we yawned and swayed, breathing into each other's expressionless faces, like forms packaged up for hell ... The tired heavily made up faces of girls, thrust up against mine, smelling of cheap cosmetics and expressing the vacancy of youth without its joy, seemed to declare the poverty of the human race, its miserable limitations, its absolute inability to grasp the real. Or were these spiritless surfaces simply the mirrors of my own mediocrity? (88)

The atmosphere of emptiness and mediocrity which Hilary sees mirrored in the faces of the other travellers reflects passages from T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets, which is itself a meditation upon time and human mediocrity:

Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long
between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about
(89)

The bird in the poem warns us that 'human kind/Cannot bear very much reality' (90) and this we see in Hilary's tendency to daydream rather than embrace the reality of the individuals about him:

... vivid scenes from the far past floated before my eyes with a coloured clarity which made the occupations of the present moment into shadows. (91)

This shunning of reality is a sense in which Eliot and Murdoch both use the word 'mediocrity'. Murdoch also evidently regards Hilary's tendency to stop and start time as a mediocre trait. He moves through the story by means of tiny amoral time capsules, welcoming each one as 'another blessed merciful interim' (92), and Big Ben is a recurrent image, at one point brought to a stop by a power-cut. Hilary suffers from the same evil as Bradley Pearson in The Black Prince: he has 'a swooning relationship to time' (93). In Four Quartets, 'the point of intersection of the timeless/With time, is an occupation for the saint' (94), and this is an occupation for which Hilary is plainly not fitted.

Mediocrity also characterises Hilary's relationship to words. Mr Osmand originally taught him how the careful study of language could directly connect him to notions of goodness and truth, but Hilary has corrupted the relationship by making language study into a weapon to inflate his ego by putting others down, as in the incident at the university where he shows off by writing a spiteful article against a colleague (95). As Clifford points out, there is a sense in which Hilary is 'nothing but a lout who has been taught a few tricks' (96). Interestingly, Eliot also speaks of words as weapons, but in his case the war is carried on not in order to inflate the self, but to uphold the values Mr Osmand held dear:

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion ...
... but there is no competition-
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost ...
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.
(97)

The goal, articulation, is a distant, even ambiguous one, and the struggle, which is not a competition, is a *dynamic* one carried on with partial knowledge - all features of the 'long quest' (98) for goodness discussed in the Introduction. And in fact articulation - literally, making clear where the *joins* are between things - is the problem Hilary has with his past:

> What a stupid coagulated mess of indistinguishable guilt and misery I had become. How perfectly futile all my sufferings had been. If only I could separate out that awful mixture of sin and pain ... there might be a place for a miracle. (99)

Thus the proper study of words can be an analogue of the quest for goodness. However, Hilary prefers another kind of quest, which is the role he sees himself playing as Kitty's consort: 'I now had a task, I was like a knight with a quest' (100). He is to 'do her will and then die' (101). This romantic quest is itself a kind of false or shadow analogue of the quest for goodness - Hilary actually calls it a 'move into the truth' (102) - for, as seen in the case of Charles Arrowby and his romantic pursuit of Hartley, where roles are allotted, the reality of the individual is immediately compromised. To picture your life as a story is, as James said, to falsify it (103). Tragedy is a special kind of story where certain pointed conditions at the outset predetermine the ending. The consolation of seeing Kitty's death as a tragedy is present to Hilary as a temptation, but he is forced to recognise 'the amount of sheer accident which these things, perhaps all things, contained' (104):

> I had not even the consolation of that way of picturing the matter. Tragedy belongs in art. Life has no tragedies. (105)

Richard Todd (105a) points to a connection between the ending of A Word Child and Shakespeare's King Lear. Hilary looks forward to dedicating the rest of his life to making Crystal happy: 'We two alone shall sing like birds in a cage' (106), he vows, which is also Lear's promise* to Cordelia (107). But Lear is robbed of his chance to atone when Cordelia dies, and so is Hilary, who must witness Arthur carrying Crystal away to happy married life in Blythe Road (108)#. Lear's reward for accepting that Cordelia will 'come no more' - what Murdoch praises as the depiction of 'death without a consolation' (109) - is that he sees the signs upon her lips which the others do not see. Exactly what Hilary's reward is for accepting a smaller share in the authorship of events is not so clear. Lear dies with his reward, such as it is, intact, but Hilary must live on. Perhaps Hilary's reward is that he does not, unlike Lear, go mad at the end, and he does manage to break a new cycle of slavish enshrinement of the

past by resisting the temptation to burden Crystal with the knowledge of his involvement in Kitty's death. He is to resume his life, but without supporting consolations. As he puts it, borrowing another literary allusion, 'This albatross, I could not hang around her neck.' (110)

However, I think the overall picture presented of Hilary's future is *not* that he shall live a life unsupported by consolations, but that the quality of the consolations shall undergo a change. The previous tenor of his life has been one of dramatic retribution: 'It was burning down the orphanage all over again.' (111) He has been attracted by dramatic myths, picturing himself as outcast, lost boy Peter Pan, as 'reality breaking in' (112) on the insipid domestic world of the Darlings. Arthur provides an alternative reading, and one perhaps closer to the spirit of the play:

> 'On the contrary. What is real is the Darling's home life ... Peter is ... spirit gone wrong*, just turning up as an unnerving visitor who can't really help and can't get in either ... the spiritual urge is mad unless it's embodied in some ordinary way of life ... I think Nana is the hero ... There's nothing bogus about Nana. Nana doesn't *talk*. (113)

This reading, plus Gunnar's reading of Peter as 'childishness ... invested with spirituality' (114), gives some insight into Hilary's character of dangerous, immature alien prowling on the fringes of the Jopling camp. His particular grammar-equals-goodness kind of spirituality is not rooted in anything ordinary. In fact Hilary is characterised by rootlessness, which shows in his endless riding of the underground and his parasitic liking to 'live in other people's worlds' (115) and have none of his own. He is rootless too in a class sense. He feels shame for his working-class origins and his sister, yet he feels always insecure in the world of Oxford; he desires 'Lady Kitty', yet reacts violently to the trappings of her world, as when he feels 'the poor man's primeval hatred of the man on the horse' (116), and, as regards the love quest, he feels at the end that he miscast himself: 'if only I could, as befitted my station, have loved the maid and not the mistress.' (117)

As Hilary makes his round of calls, all the meals are carefully catalogued, from the tinned tongue, instant mashed potatoes and peas he regularly gets at Arthur's, and the fillet steak, salad and treacle tart provided at Tommy's, to the *nouvelle cuisine* served up by the Impiatts. Todd calls the way food is used in A Word Child as 'an index of personality' (118), and people in the book express their individuality or group identity through the kinds of food they prepare and eat. Hilary seems to by-pass the index, in true cave-man fashion devouring whatever is

put before him without discrimination, only marvelling that his hosts bother to make so much fuss over it. He boasts that, like Wittgenstein, he doesn't mind what he eats so long as it is always the same, and there really seems to be something wolf-like and scandalous about this indifference to the hospitality offered him.

But Hilary's indifference to food is only superficial, masking a touchiness about his origins. At Crystal's they doggedly eat English stodge but, as Dipple points out (119), when Crystal suggests getting some nice bread from the health-food shop, Hilary yells at her for getting ideas above her station.

In The Sea, The Sea, food is again an index, though this time as a pointer to the state of Charles's mind. His meals, including their preparation, are catalogued in imperious detail - 'bananas should be cut, *never* mashed' (120). We hear little of his life as a theatre director, but we get a sufficient sense of his dictatorial tendencies, and of how he is perceived by his friends and enemies, from what he tells us of the speculative Charles Arrowby Four Minute Cookbook:

> Of course my methods ... may scandalise fools, and the various people ... who urged me to publish my recipies did so with an air of amused condescension. Your name will sell the book, they tactlessly insisted ... And let me say here that *of course* my guests *always* sit squarely at tables, never balance plates on their knees, and *always* have proper table napkins, *never* paper ones. (121)

The style of Charles's cuisine, a brisk, optimistic, arrogant hedonism, is also the projected style of his writing, and matches his complacent state of mind at this point. But Charles's state of mind is fragile, as is suggested by the lurking sea-monster and Shruff End's mysterious 'inner room' (122), both of which seem to represent nasty thought bubbles rising from the unconscious; and this fragility is matched, when the Hartley drama gathers momentum, by the way he abdicates control in the kitchen. His early approval of 'the precious gift of hunger' (123) and the resolve 'not to cook grandly' (124) thus parallel a kind of ill-founded moral optimism, for, as his reflecting ego musters strength from the past, he finds he can neither curb its growing appetite, nor preserve an innocent response to his surroundings.

In fact we are made very aware of *appetite* in this book, and not just Charles's, as when for example the predatory Rosina, smiling and showing her 'white fishy teeth' (125), sarcastically wishes Charles '*bon appetite' (126)* before metamorphosing into 'the snake-like head and teeth and pink opening mouth of my sea monster' (127). It could be argued that this

vision reflects Charles's instinctive fear of women, or of the female, within and around him. Eat or be eaten, these images seem to demand. But the serpent transformation certainly acts as a premonitory vision of Charles's relationship to his own past: having promised the reader to leave his past unmolested, to passively record it, he then goes ahead, monster-fashion, to swallow it up and regurgitate it as something quite unexpected.

In fact Charles devours the past, gorging his greedy ego, much as Hilary devours languages, swallowing continents of other people's words. Hilary's stated aim in accumulating languages is the laudable one that

> 'nothing humbles human pride more than inability to understand a language. It's a perfect image of spiritual limitation ... [God] wanted us to see that goodness is a foreign language.' (128)

But when Laura Impiatt remarks that she 'can't think how the words of all those languages don't get all mixed up in your head ... they would in mine', Hilary's witty riposte (or witty repast), 'Word pie', seems to be more than just a characteristic sly criticism of the food before them - 'a mess of pineapple covered with some sort of nasty pungent liqueur'. It seems in fact to link the ego directly with the stomach, especially as, a moment later, Gunnar Jopling is mentioned. Gunnar, rifting up again into Hilary's present, is, as it were, an unpalatable portion of Hilary's greedy past and part of the nightmarish vision of retribution he is pursued by. Echoing the threatening crocodile image in Peter Pan, Hilary feels himself to be 'something half crushed, something swallowed, not yet digested and still screaming.' (129) And with this in mind, Clifford's last words to Hilary, spoken just before Clifford organises a quiet suicide for himself, 'One should at least digest one's pain in silence and not parade it' (130), take on an extra resonance.

A further revelation of Arthur's speech is in his nominating Nana, the dog-nurse to the Darling children, as 'hero', and of Hilary objecting to it. Nana knows her responsibilities, lives up to them and is *silent*, which is one touchstone for saintly action in the book. Hilary, on the other hand, never manages to will his own disappearance, which he sees to be a duty, though he constantly and self-consciously speaks of himself as 'a man destined to vanish' (131). These lapses of reticence are indications that Hilary is in some way acting beyond his moral ability: having rejected the religion of his childhood he is in a sort of spiritual no-man's land where his new religion of words cannot help him. To put it another way, he is really too much of an artist with words to be a saint of silence.

Arthur and Tommy champion the redeeming qualities of ordinary happy family life with children, and this is the direction in which the potential for Hilary's future happiness might lie. The tempo of his past life has been made up of the drama of the 'Jesus Christ story ... this changing of death into a fairytale of constructive suffering' (132), and of Kitty's 'final solution' baby-plan (133) to - like the Christ child - atone for sins committed, and of the alienation of his Peter Pan role, and the suffering brought on by a crippled past. The ambiguous ending of the novel suggests that, if he cooperates with the determined Tommy, the tempo of his future life - a justified consolation derived from his acquired wisdom - might be one of domesticity, belonging and happiness.

A Word Child and The Sea, The Sea define the truly moral hero not as quester, the glamorous daring-doer who rides off into the past to take on demons with sword or pen, but the man - or, more often, the woman - who stands still and looks about him into the living present. In the same terms, goodness becomes, not something to be conquered in a once-for-all surge, but a strange, unfashionable tongue - as Hilary says, 'a foreign language' - that we learn in tiny half-heard instalments from imperfect exponents, so that we constantly forget the words and the grammar and have to relearn them in a process which is truly dynamic. And the final paradox is that the language of goodness is one that, if it is not to be debased, must not be spoken. Goodness, like Nana, 'doesn't talk' (134).

At the start of this chapter I hinted at the complexity of the transactions that must take place in the human mind in order for the ego to survive. The concept of goodness is death to the ego and yet, as explained above, the ego is resilient enough to appropriate the concept to itself, largely by overlooking its dynamic aspect. I would like now to go on and describe these suspensions of disbelief, this chicanery of the self, in more detail. To return to the parable, enlightenment begins to dawn when the prisoner slips his chains and is able to turn away from the endless film-show which previously filled his vision and step towards the fire in the cave. One would suppose that, seeing how it had been deluding itself, the self would crumble and shrink under this unimagined threat to its supremacy. But the self, as we shall see, is a master of self-deception, and is quite able to turn such threats to its advantage. The fire, which the true pilgrim comes to regard as only a brief resting-place in his ascent of the cave, becomes enshrined and worshipped as a false sun, the focal-point of a sophisticated 'metaphysic of the drawing room' (135); or, in less domestic imagery, the

fire, closely identified by Murdoch with the self, becomes a 'perpetual bonfire' (136), a kind of non-stop forge (a resonant term) where ingenious craftsmen turn out 'plausible imitations of what is good' (137).

CHAPTER TWO: Self-Deception in *A Severed Head*, *The Black Prince* and *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*

Consider, then, what would be the manner of the release and healing from these bonds and this folly. Suppose one of them were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk towards the fire; all these actions would be painful and he would be too dazzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see the shadows. So if he was told that what he used to see was mere illusion and that he was now nearer reality and seeing more correctly, because he was turned towards objects that were more real, and if on top of that he were compelled to say what each of the passing objects was when it was pointed out to him, don't you think he would be at a loss, and think that what he used to see was more real than the objects now being pointed out to him? (1)

In Plato's account of the Cave, the fire is something the newly-released pilgrim stumbles upon in his first moments of freedom. While there, he is 'dazzled' and bewildered by strange sights and sensations, before being quickly led on to the next stage of enlightenment by the unseen guide. There is no sense of him dwelling there or becoming reconciled to the place: it is no more than a kind of temporary refugee camp.

But, as explained in the Introduction, Iris Murdoch, in The Sovereignty of Good, broods interestingly on the fire, stoking it with significance, identifying it with the self, 'the old unregenerate psyche, that great source of energy and warmth' (2), and warning us, in the same passage, that 'the impulse to worship is deep and ambiguous and old'. Murdoch's pilgrim does not stay bewildered for long, but rapidly familiarises himself with his new surroundings, invigorated by having seen through the sham:

> They see the flames which threw the shadows which they used to think were real, and they can see the puppets, imitations of things in the real world ... They do not yet dream that there is anything else to see. (3)

However, enlightenment soon turns to complacency. The fire is venerated, and all intimations of a greater light are forgotten in the lurid glare of this 'false sun' (4). But the *self-sufficient* camp-fire dweller does not rest at merely mocking or pitying his benighted neighbours, who are still manacled to the shadow-play, but soon develops an evangelising streak, and begins to proselytise. The new creed is self-fulfillment, a seductive and debased version of the original quest for goodness. Upon its exponents, especially the ones who make a living by it, like the 'professional liberator' (5) Palmer Anderson in A Severed Head, Murdoch heaps some of her wittiest scorn.

Palmer is a psychiatrist who uses a sophisticated version of Freud's talking cure in his practice and his private life. Much of what Freud originally taught about the psyche has since been discredited*. Nevertheless, Freud continues to influence popular thought, literature, and of course psychiatry. What I wish here to discuss is Murdoch's interest in the ingenuity of human self-deception, and this is best seen in her 'Freudian' novels, that is to say, those in which Freudian practitioners are seen to set up their stalls by the camp-fire in Murdoch's customised cave. For example, in A Severed Head (1961), Murdoch shows how morality is soon ousted by the chattering sophistry of the civilised world; and again, in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine (1974), she shows how rapacious the ego can be when equipped with a few lines of dubious Freudian sales-talk: the talking-cure, though it may have its uses, is shown to be incompatible with a goodness which enjoins silence. And in The Black Prince (1973) Murdoch performs a literary sleight-of-hand which matches the fakery of the ego at its most subtle pitch. She parades before us, for our dismissive mockery, character judgemnts which are either seriously reductive or just plain wrong, and then, almost in the same breath, coaxes us to identify with those very same judgements; and in performing this stroke of double-think upon her audience, Murdoch also makes some startling connections between art and the moral life.

In A Severed Head, Martin Lynch-Gibbon and his mistress, Georgie Hands, are discussing Palmer, the 'professional liberator'. Georgie reminds Martin of Plato's warning that 'anyone who is good at setting people free is also good at enslaving them' (6); and indeed Martin is shortly to find this out, for the openness and permissiveness which Palmer preaches, which enables Martin to 'worry less about the rules' (7) in his own life, also enables Palmer to appropriate Martin's wife, Antonia.

Martin's initial response to Palmer's coup is a violent one, but this fledgling emotion is quickly repressed by an appeal to 'civilised' values. It is worth looking at this interview in some detail, to gain a sense of the subtlety of the transaction. It takes place, significantly, with Martin reclining on the divan where Palmer interviews his patients:

> 'We are civilised people,' said Palmer. 'We must try to be very lucid and very honest ... Some people, and Antonia is one, conceive of their lives as a progress. Hers has been standing still for too long. She is due to move on ...'
> 'Marriage is an adventure in development,' I said.
> 'Exactly.'

'And it is time for Antonia to take a more advanced course ...'

'I admire your capacity for facing the facts,' he said ... There is little point in talking of guilt ... You know as well as I do that any such talk would be insincere, whether in your accusations or my confessions ... You have been a child to Antonia and she a mother to you, and that has kept you both spiritually speaking at a standstill ... Haven't you sometimes realised the extent to which you now regard yourself both as a child and as an old man?'

This was very acute. 'Nonsense,' I said. 'I reject your explanations ...' The warmth and Palmer's almost noiseless movements and his repetition of my name had produced in me a sort of stupor, so that I hardly knew what to say to him ...

'I knew you'd take it well, I knew you'd take it splendidly.'

'I'm not aware that I've yet revealed *how* I'm taking it!' I said. But as I said this I realised with a bitter clarity that I had already fallen into my role of 'taking it well', which had been prepared for me by Palmer and Antonia. I had put my head straight into the halter which with care and concern and even affection was being held out. It was important to them that I should let them off morally, that I should spare them the necessity of being ruthless ...

'How do you know I'll go on liking you, Palmer?' I said. I felt my faculties slipping.

'You will,' said Palmer.

'Loving one's successful rival?'

'The psyche is a strange thing,' he said, 'and it has its own mysterious methods of restoring a balance. It automatically seeks its advantage, its consolation. It is almost entirely a matter of mechanics, and mechanical models are the best to understand it with.' (8)

Palmer uses the words 'lucidity', 'honesty' and 'sincerity', which would seem to connect his approach with the reality-seeking pilgrimage; and his confident claim that one can end up 'loving one's successful rival' seems to be in line with Christ's recommendation to love thine enemy. Yet Martin senses that some essential ingredient of goodness is missing: they wish to be 'let off ... morally'. And in the halter image, Martin is to receive a punishment which rightly belongs to Palmer and Antonia.

'Honesty' here is a sort of numbing virtue. Palmer, helped by clever body language and hypnotic incantations ('I was to all intents and purposes his patient' [9]), administers the anaesthetic of 'sincerity', temporarily paralysing Martin's moral sense, and relieving them all of the inconvenient pain of guilt. The only casualty is to be Martin's wounded ego, which, Palmer assures him, will quickly heal itself.

In 'Against Dryness' Murdoch challenges the way 'sincerity' is championed as the highest virtue. Current philosophy has pared away the other virtues* to leave what Murdoch calls scathingly 'modern man':

> We meet, for instance, a refined picture of this man in Stuart Hampshire's book Thought and Action. He is rational and totally

> free except in so far as, in the most ordinary law-court and commonsensical sense, his degree of self-awareness may vary. He is morally speaking monarch of all he surveys and totally responsible for his actions. Nothing transcends him ... His inner life is resolved into his acts and choices ... His rationality expresses itself in awareness of the facts, whether about the world or himself. The virtue which is fundamental to him is sincerity. (10)

The consequence, Murdoch explains, of elevating sincerity to the position of chief virtue is that it tends to break free from the matrix of other virtues, where it belongs, with the inevitable result that self-interest becomes the prime motive to consult*. One of the 'severings' implied in A Severed Head is this very isolation of a particular virtue from the body of other virtues. Palmer and Antonia have acknowledged their wants, been open with Martin about their love, and so see no cause for any guilt at having disrupted Martin's marriage. In fact Palmer even seizes the moral high ground by claiming that the disruption is a 'move on', the necessary shove for a relationship which 'has been standing still for too long'.

However, as I stressed in the previous chapter, goodness is about vision, not movement, and it is the inappropriateness of this metaphor which is responsible for the humour in this and other passages. When Antonia complains 'we aren't getting anywhere', Martin's response is 'One doesn't have to get anywhere in a marriage. It's not a public conveyance' (11). This makes Martin's sarcastic suggestion that 'it is time for Antonia to take a more advanced course' sound like Palmer is advocating a superior driving test. But goodness is about seeing more, and for that you need to stop and look about you: you need to have a slower morality, Murdoch warns us, not a faster one.

Palmer's brand of 'sincerity' involves acknowledging and exploiting role play, so that much of his power over Martin comes from knowing - as he hints above - that Antonia's relationship to Martin is a motherly one. This enables Palmer and Antonia to exercise authority over Martin as his 'parents' (12). Thus Martin is outmanoeuvred on two fronts. Firstly, he is trapped into playing the son to Palmer and Antonia as parents in an Oedipal drama. That myth, which of course Freud made his central psycho-drama, ends with the son killing his father and sleeping with his mother. But the pathway of violence is blocked to Martin by Palmer's skill in verbalising and thus 'civilising' the drama, so that Martin is 'confounded by the utter impossiblity of violence. Yet violence, veiled with misery, moved within' (13).

What is ironic here is that the talking cure is supposed to coax inner conflicts and resentments to the surface of consciousness, where, as it

were, the light of reason will wither them. But instead Martin's several consultations with Palmer serve only to drive the conflict deeper, so that it emerges in a bizarre and unpredictable form with Martin attempting to commandeer Palmer's sister, Honor Klein.

Secondly, Martin is trapped into playing 'the role of the deceived husband' (14), so that his inner voice cries out at one point, 'I was their prisoner' (15). But, as Georgie points out, this is largely a trap of his own making: playing 'the virtuous aggrieved husband so as to keep Palmer and Antonia in your power' (16).

Recalling the role-play in this bald way makes it sound very crude and unconvincing, and it is important to remember what a sophisticated gloss Murdoch gives to it in her writing*. Palmer is no crude juggler with words, but a clever and seductive operator, as Conradi points out, a 'modern magician' (17). Martin, with reluctant admiration, describes him thus:

> Palmer conveys an immediate impression of gentleness and sweetness and almost, so far have good manners here assumed the air of a major virtue, of goodness. (18)

Here again, the substitition of the sovereign Murdochian virtue, goodness, by good manners indicates the general corruption of virtues in the world in which the protagonists move. Martin reserves his sharpest irony for Antonia, Palmer's weak-minded accomplice in this plot to usurp his position:

> She holds that all human beings should aspire towards, and are within working distance of, a perfect communion of souls. This creed, which borrows as little from popular Oriental cults as it does from Antonia's vestigial Christianity, may best be described as a metaphysic of the drawing-room. (19)

The Palmer-Antonia ethos is a cunning amalgam of religion and pseudo-science. It is the cultured and respectable face of self-interest, and the Platonic Fire in this novel could be thought of as enclosed within a very elegant marble fireplace.

Martin's liberation doesn't begin until the arrival of Honor Klein, who, as an anthroplogist, comes to represent the force of more primitive cultures. When Martin is sent to fetch her from the station he is, morally speaking, at his most blind, and the foggy scene of their meeting, with its 'sulphur and brimstone' (20), is like a hellish backwater of the Cave:

> The platform lights were dulled, powerless to cast any radiance out into the relentless haze, so that the darkness seemed to have got inside one's head ... One moved about within a small dimly lit sphere, surrounded by an opaque yet luminous yellow night out of which with startling suddenness people and things materialised ... The baffled headlights glowed, tiny futile balls, in front of a wall of darkness which their beams could not pierce. (21)

Up to this point Palmer and Antonia have been untouchable, 'a pair of sovereigns, distant and serene', but Honor's arrival suggests a violent image to Martin, one to liberate his pent-up aggression:

> She stood there in the doorway, her gaze fixed upon the golden pair by the fire, her head thrown back, her face exceedingly pale; and she appeared to me for a second like some insolent and powerful captain, returning booted and spurred from a field of triumph, the dust of battle yet upon him, confronting the sovereign powers he was now ready if need be to bend to his will. (22)

The repetition of 'sovereign' brings us back to goodness, for it is as though different virtues (Honor's name is perhaps significant here) are competing for supremacy. The more virtues to enter the fray, Murdoch suggests, the less likely it is for one virtue to assume a dangerous monopoly. The opposition of Palmer and Honor also suggests different ways of picturing the psyche. Palmer's view of the psyche, in his 'mechanical models' speech, quoted above, is of an understandable, predictable and therefore essentially *controllable* machine. Like Freud, he sees it as 'an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy' (23). But Honor, as we shall shortly see, connects the psyche with images of incomprehensible barbarism which are alien to those of the civilised world. As Murdoch warns in The Sovereignty of Good, the psyche is really not like a machine at all, with a handy on-off switch, but more like a sleeping giant. And in fact Murdoch's image of 'the fat relentless ego' (further discussed in the Introduction) tends to suggest a dozing demon, whose awakenings are unpredictable and whose energy is frightening and uncontrollable.

If we think of the Fire in these terms too, and especially of the quality of light it could be imagined to radiate, then the optimistic cocktail brightness of Antonia's version of it, and the fluorescent laboratory glare of Palmer's version of it, are balanced by the pessimistic nightmare darkness and 'tiny futile balls' of light which Martin experiences in Honor's presence.

The title of this novel, A Severed Head, suggests a death is imminent, perhaps a murder. In fact the cycle of physical violence in the novel is very mild: Martin hits Honor, then he hits Palmer - nobody gets killed. The violence marks a new ascendency: Palmer, previously Martin's 'father', now becomes 'like a child' (24); and when Martin is reunited with his wife, he and Antonia, once his 'mother', now become 'like two aged parents wishing the young people well' (25). We could see this as Martin at last growing up, taking on a more adult role, but this is not the same thing as progress towards goodness, for goodness demands not the switching of roles but the

progressive abandonment of role-play itself.* And in fact the Martin-Antonia re-alliance is soon broken for a fresh one, which is perhaps Murdoch's way of further showing the inadequacy of Palmer's child-role-to-adult-role notion of growth.

The clue to the title is in Honor's response to Martin's declaration of love:

> 'Your love for me does not inhabit the real world. Yes, it is love, I do not deny it. But not every love has a course to run, smooth or otherwise, and this love has no course at all. Because of what I am and because of what you saw I am a terrible object of fascination for you. I am a severed head such as primitive tribes and old alchemists used to use, anointing it with oil and putting a morsel of gold upon its tongue to make it utter prophecies. And who knows but that long acquaintance with a severed head might not lead to strange knowledge.' (26)

Honor has become this 'object of fascination' for Martin because he witnessed the incestuous embrace of Honor and her brother. This witnessing gives Martin power over Palmer. The image of the severed head recalls the Fire in the cave#, and the associated 'impulse to worship' it, which Murdoch reminds us 'is deep and ambiguous and old' (27); and the mysterious rituals which accompany the image seem to predate Palmer's clinical and Antonia's domesticated concepts of the psyche by thousands of years.

Honor's account of the psyche, bearing in mind the brutal impulses she has revealed by merely scratching the surface of 'civilisation', seems to ring with authority, and yet it remains scarcely comprehensible. What can she mean by a love which exists and yet has 'no course at all'? And she warns Martin off, but speaks with tantalising coolness of the 'strange knowledge' which such a love might bring.

To find an answer to this puzzle we need to go back again to The Sovereignty of Good and see where love fits into the Murdochian hierarchy of virtues. Here she considers, along with Freedom, Reason, Happiness, etcetera, whether Love, supplanting Goodness, might not best sit atop the pyramid:

> I want now to speak of what is perhaps the most obvious as well as the most ancient and traditional claimant ... Love. Of course Good is sovereign over Love ... because Love can name something bad ... [but] will not 'Act lovingly' translate 'Act perfectly', whereas 'Act rationally' will not? It is tempting to say so ... [But no] the concepts, even where the idea of love is purified, still play different roles. Good is a magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves ... Love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived of as lying beyond it ... Love is the general name of the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when

> it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in search for Good. (28)

I think this is the sense in which Honor speaks of 'strange knowledge'. Martin has for her the kind of love which is 'infinitely degraded': despite his protestations this corrupted love does not recognise her as a real person ('As real people we do not exist for each other' [29], she declares) but only as a necessary figure in his private psycho-drama. And yet the final message is that *all* love, however deluded or ultimately self-serving, has within it the important potential for being made better. And that potential for being made better, that even partial refinement, is our human access to goodness.

The 'morsel of gold' which Martin puts into the mouth of his own graven image is obviously not, as it were, genuine coin of the realm of goodness. As the self-deluding Pip laments in Great Expectations:

> That I should innocently take a bad half-crown of somebody else's manufacture, is reasonable enough; but that I should knowingly reckon the spurious coin of my own make, as good money! (30)

And indeed, of all the forms of deceit, self-deceit is the most bizarre and dangerous, undermining with its forgeries the entire economy of goodness.

And yet in A Severed Head Murdoch seems reluctant to give such coin zero credit, allowing Martin and Honor to conclude the novel with one of her more optimistic endings, which even has echoes of a blissful emergence from the cave:

> 'Well, we must hold hands tightly and hope that we can keep hold of each other through the dream and out into the waking world.' (31)

Perhaps this is because, as The Sovereignty of Good hints, Love, being 'the source of our greatest errors', is inseparably connected to the self-deceiving faculty of the psyche.

We can take this idea of the deceptive powers of the self further in The Black Prince. Peter Conradi, writing about this novel, comments wisely:

> The 'illusions' of love are by no means valueless. Its reality might be said to lie in the fact that it involves an apparent loss of self in the lover and a concentration on the reality of someone other than oneself. Its unreality follows in that such keen insights should be democratised, spread more evenly. (32)

In the previous chapter I discussed Murdoch's concept: 'love is knowledge of the individual' (33). But love is not an automatic or infallible dispenser

of knowledge. As The Sovereignty of Good stresses, love is something that has to be worked at, an 'endless task' in which we 'grow by looking' (34). And Murdoch's account of love comes with the additional caution that, often when we think we are looking *outwards* at another individual reality, we are in fact, as Charles Arrowby found, looking *inwards* at our own selves; the problem here being that 'the self is such a dazzling object that if one looks *there* one may see nothing else' (35).

This is the nature of the '"illusions" of love' Conradi describes. In fact the sub-title of the novel is 'A Celebration of Love'. This, with the fictional editor's assertion in the Foreword that 'man's creative struggle, his search for wisdom and truth, is a love story' (36), suggests that we are being asked in this novel to think anew about the very nature of Love, and to learn to recognise its inward and outward-looking faces.

Our guide in this investigation is the narrator of the novel, Bradley Pearson. He is generally regarded by the other characters, in a way which recalls the guide in Plato's parable, as 'a wise man, a sort of hermit or ascetic' (37). He tells us he has lived 'a great dull life' (38), as though foregoing the pleasures of the flesh has given him authority to speak on spiritual matters.

Bradley is an artist, specifically a writer. Plato distrusted all artists, regarding them as professional liars and therefore anti-good. Murdoch, however, invests a lot of energy in getting us to trust Bradley as a narrator in the unfolding tale, making us aware of his restraint and fastidiousness and his resolve 'to tell truth' (39). In discarding 'the most dramatically effective' (40) opening, for instance, Bradley draws attention to the arbitrary nature of any story, and hence to the limitations of narrative: 'Where after all', he cautions, 'does anything begin?' (41) Unlike the sensationalising newspapers ('Writer Slays His Friend out of Envy' [42] they trumpet) he resists the temptation to tell a murder story but instead tries to keep faith with a 'deeper pattern' (43):

> I have never tried to please at the expense of truth ... The most potent and sacred command which can be laid upon any artist is the command: wait. Art has its martyrs, not least those who have preserved their silence. There are, I hazard, saints of art who have simply waited mutely all their lives rather than profane the purity of a single page with anything less than what is perfectly appropriate and beautiful, that is to say, with anything less than what is true. (44)

This statement, and Bradley's narration is littered with such pieces of wisdom, seems to resonate with authority, and in fact closely resembles remarks Murdoch has herself made about restraint:

> The high-temperature fusing power of the creative imagination, so often and eloquently described by the Romantics, is the reward of the sober truthful mind which, as it reflects and searches, constantly says no and no and no to the prompt easy visions of self-protective, self-promoting fantasy. (45)

Bradley might indeed seem to be a thin disguise for the presence of the author herself, for there is a lot of talk of persona and masks in this novel. Bradley, in telling his story, speaks through 'the *persona* of the self of several years ago' (46), and his surname, Pearson, is surely an anagram of persona. Bradley's outpourings to Julian about how 'Hamlet is Shakespeare' (47) - an identification which, he says, but for Shakespeare's especial genius, would normally preclude great art - is all about daring revelation behind cunning disguise: 'He [Shakespeare] is speaking as few artists can speak, in the first person and yet at the pinnacle of artifice.' (48) And cross-text identifications emerge as Francis Marloe points out that 'we have only to consider the two initial letters of his name. (Black Prince [of Denmark]. Bradley Pearson.)' (49)

But the relationship between author and persona in this novel is more complex than this attractive scheme suggests, for Murdoch splits her identity between Bradley and rival writer Arnold Baffin. Arnold, like Murdoch, but unlike Bradley, who destroys almost everything he writes, is a prolific and successful writer. Arnold's approach is:

> 'I write whether I feel like it or not. I complete things whether I think they're perfect or not. Anything else is hypocrisy. I have no muse ... You are such an agonizer, Bradley. You romanticize art. You're a masochist about it, you want to suffer, you want to feel that your inability to create is continuously significant.' (50)

Nigella Lawson points out that this tension between the reticent Bradley and the prolific Arnold 'is emblematic of her [Murdoch's] own artistic negotiations'. Like Bradley, she believes the good writer must have a disciplined approach to his work and be prepared to prune the unworthy; but like Arnold, she is famously productive: 'She once admitted to having started work on a new novel half an hour after finishing the last one'. (51)

It is as though Murdoch has here both sides of her writing nature on view, so that we are asked to choose between Arnold's sloppy eclecticism, which Julian describes as 'Jesus and Mary and Buddha and Shiva and the Fisher King all chasing round and round dressed up as people in Chelsea' (52), and Bradley's needle-sharp* artistic integrity:

> Any artist knows that the space between the stage where the work is too unformed to have committed itself and the stage where it is too late to improve it can be as thin as a needle. Genius

> perhaps consists in opening out this needle-like area until it covers almost the whole of the working time. Most artists, through sheer idleness, weariness, inability to attend, drift again and again from the one stage straight into the other, in spite of good resolutions and the hope with which each new work begins. This is of course a moral problem, since all art is the struggle to be, in a particular sort of way, virtuous. (53)

There seems no contest here. If Bradley's work measures up to the stringent standards he sets himself, then he must be the better artist. But the appeal is wider than this, for Bradley yokes together artistic and *moral* mediocrity, insisting that 'a work of art is as good as its creator. It cannot be more so.' (54) It follows that Bradley must be a better man than Arnold; and indeed, once we are aware of this equation, then even fairly innocent criticisms become loaded with judgement, for example the playful Chelsea menagerie which Julian describes becomes a hotbed of Sixties permisiveness, which in turn reflects badly upon Arnold's behaviour as a husband and father.

Using this strategy, Murdoch gets the reader to identify with Bradley, to accept him as an authentic narrator, a speaker free from the taint of self-deception, and so to dismiss the alternative accounts of the novel's action as partial. But her great achievement is the skill with which, having established Bradley as a trustworthy guide out of the cave, she then undermines his status and encourages us to dismiss his account as nothing more than what she calls in The Sovereignty of Good another 'plausible imitation' (55) of goodness. However, as we shall see, the overall effect is not that the reader comes to distrust Bradley absolutely, but rather that we are obliged to reassess his original equation between writer and moral agent.

At the beginning of the novel Bradley is a blocked writer, waiting 'to pass through some *ordeal*' (56) which will release his talents. The nature of this ordeal is hidden from him, but he perceives, in the arrival of Francis Marloe, a 'messenger of fate' (57). Via Francis, Bradley becomes aware of violence and unhappiness in the Baffin household, and of the possibility of an affair between himself and Rachel, Arnold's wife. Bradley's Hamlet-like hesitations here are worth examining. He is attracted to her, recognises that she needs affection in her disappointed life, and intuits that she may be a 'messenger of the god' (58). But he is also acutely aware that a liaison with Rachel might represent a significant victory in his long-running psychological war against rival Arnold, who has just then commandeered Bradley's ex-wife, Christian. In moving towards Rachel, then, Bradley fears he may be being seduced by the attractions of 'a sense of form' (59) and a 'feeling of destiny' (60):

> A serious kiss can alter the world and should not be allowed to take place simply because the scene will be disfigured without it ... There are no spare unrecorded encapsulated moments in which we can behave 'anyhow' and then expect to resume life where we left off. The wicked regard time as discontinuous, the wicked dull their sense of natural causality. The good feel being as a total dense mesh of tiny interconnections. (61)

We saw in Chapter One how Hilary Burde's tendency to travel in amoral time capsules was a symptom of his wickedness, and how this in turn was closely bound up with his being a bad artist. Bradley's vision is raised above this. He can see and distinguish, even as his relatively immature self, the different levels of his motivation, so that he is unimpressed by possible cross-text identifications. As he explains to Arnold's daughter, Julian, in their Hamlet tutorial, 'The unconscious mind delights in identifying people with each other. It has only a few characters to play with.' (62) And Bradley tacks onto the end of this revealing statement the important corollary that 'it is true, but it doesn't matter. A sophisticated reader takes such things in his stride.' (63)

This assumption of 'sophistication' is very flattering for the reader, who does not of course, hearing it, want to be lumped in with those readers who, registering an identification are paralysed by it, and who imagine that a laborious list of cross-text identifications between The Black Prince and Hamlet (Arnold as Claudius, Rachel as Gertrude, and so on) would be illuminating: 'The black prince is not Hamlet of course, but that's by the way, ' (64) said Murdoch in interview, thereby casually closing down an entire industrial estate of critical study*.

And similarly, the smart reader is likely to reject the muddled colour-supplement kind of Freudian identifications which Francis provides in his analysis of Bradley's behaviour:

> Bradley tells us in so many words that his parents kept a *paper* shop. (Paper:papa.) The 'crime' of soiling paper (defaecation) is a natural image of the revolt against the father. It is here that we must seek the source of that paranoia. (65)

Like the other commentators who provide postscripts at the end of the novel, Francis wants to commandeer Bradley's story for his own purposes, which include closing ranks on the disgraced Bradley and electing himself as kingpin in the drama by persuading us that he is the focus of Bradley's love. Francis played an unhappy and confused minor part in Bradley's story. In rewriting it to his own taste he becomes the chief figure, authoritative and in control, while Bradley's role is cut to that of pathetic hanger-on. Out of Bradley's disgrace comes Francis's glory. As

Bradley himself pointed out when he was enjoying ascendency over Francis: 'it is not enough to suceed; others must fail' (66). Gaining information about yourself can be a source of freedom. As Freud found out, tracing the source of a neurosis can effectively neutralise it. But as Bradley realises, the unconscious is a large and mysterious entity:

> I will not go on about the shop. I still dream about it at least once a week. Francis Marloe thought this very significant when I told him once. But Francis belongs to that sad crew of semi-educated theorizers who prefer any general blunted 'symbolic' explanation to the horror of confronting a unique human history. Francis wanted to 'explain' me ... Of course we have an 'unconscious mind' and this is partly what my book is about. But there is no general chart of that lost continent. Certainly not a 'scientific' one. (67)

Just like Palmer Anderson, Francis treats the unconscious as a small discrete entity, a predictable essentially controllable mechanism which can be neatly summed up in the alliterative title of his forthcoming monograph, 'Bradley Pearson, the Paranoic from the Paper Shop'. (68) And in doing so Francis literally assists in taking Bradley's freedom away. Whereas Bradley, with his striking image of a 'lost continent', of which exploration would be a difficult and dangerous occupation*, is much closer to Honor Klein.

Of course we laugh at Francis's crude manipulations, and reject the suggestion that as readers we might belong to his 'sad crew'. That, together with Bradley's evident struggle to be honest with us, and the feeling later in the book that he is unfairly persecuted - despite what other crimes he may have committed, he does not murder Arnold, which is what he is accused of - places a huge pressure on the reader to identify with Bradley and his way of picturing himself. In fact several times Bradley challenges the reader to turn against him, inviting a reductive analysis, as in the passage where he has just realised that he is in love with Rachel and provides a 'popular' version of the complex scenario he has been at pains to describe:

> 'A frustrated fellow, no longer young, lacking confidence in himself as a man: of course, naturally, he feels that a good fuck would set him up, release his talents, in which incidentally he has given us no good reason to believe. He pretends he is thinking about his book, while really he is thinking about a woman's breasts. He pretends he is apprehensive about his moral uprightness, but really it is quite another sort of rectitude that is causing him anxiety.' (69)

This passage is funny not just on account of the pun on 'rectitude' and because the four-letter word is unexpected in this self-confessed elderly

puritan, but because it is also so very *plausible*. Not only would an affair with Rachel be a kind of confirmation of manhood but, as Bradley several times reminds us, a means of 'scoring off Arnold' (70). Despite his honest resolve to 'console Rachel with *innocent* love' (71), we learn a few pages later that he has fallen in love with her daughter, Julian, a girl nearly forty years his junior. Again Bradley teases us, offering his putative reader, 'impatient with the foregoing lyricism', cynical words of condemnation to throw back at him:

> 'Pshaw!' he will say, 'the fellow protests too much and intoxicates himself with words. He admits to being a thoroughly repressed man, no longer young. All he means is that he suddenly felt intense sexual desire for a girl of twenty. We all know about that.' (72)

Bradley defends himself by speaking of the 'vision of selflessness' (73) which his love for Julian has provided, but the seeds of doubt are sown by that excess of protestation. Viewed from the standpoint of the sceptic, Bradley's high-mindedness begins to seem like an act. And yet, if we hold faithfully to the thread of Bradley's commentary, if we accept the role 'dear reader', then it does not seem like an act*. How can we explain this?

I hazard that, through the character of Bradley, Murdoch is playing out a drama of self-deception which is so subtle that it is, perhaps literally, beyond words to express. Something of this is hinted in one of Bradley's confessional asides to the reader, where he ruefully admits that, though he hungers for good in his art and his life, the magnetic pull of that urge is as nothing compared to the 'Niagara-force' (74) of his own ego:

> We desire to be richer, handsomer, cleverer, stronger, more adored and more apparently good than anyone else. I say 'apparently' because the average man while he covets real wealth, normally covets only apparent good. The burden of genuine goodness is instinctively appreciated as intolerable, and a desire for it would put out of focus the other and ordinary wishes by which one lives. Of course very occasionally and for an instant even the worst of men may wish for goodness. Anyone who is an artist can feel its magnetism. I use the word 'good' here as a veil. What it veils can be known, but not further named. (75)

What is so interesting about Bradley is that despite his self-consciousness and wonderful articulacy - perhaps even *because* of his articulacy - his *unconscious* mind is somehow insulated from what wisdom he has gained. Bradley confesses to multiple layers of motive, delineating them shrewdly and wittily. One would suppose this process would disarm the baser motives, much as Freud's talking cure is supposed to exorcise concealed patterns of thought - only, of course, we might have more faith in Bradley's

procedure, since it is not erroneously based on the literal interpretation of dreams, but instead on 'Plato's dream [of] a new place which we can then colonize and enlarge until at last we will *all* that is not ourselves' (76). But instead, the more elegantly Bradley verbalises his deepest impulses, the more they seem to bypass his consciousness altogether.

So, for example, his deepest motive in holding back from Rachel, and consequently the one all his other verbalised motives only serve to screen, is his craving for what he calls 'purity' (77). But this has two meanings where Bradley is concerned, a conscious and an unconscious one. The conscious meaning, the one brilliantly articulated in his 'saints of art' soliloquy quoted earlier, is his desire to 'be worthy' (78) to write his great book. However, the unconscious meaning of 'purity', the one which actually seems to motivate Bradley, the one we have to elicit ourselves from a full appreciation of the text, is his deep wish for *separateness*. And we can estimate the relative importance of these two meanings, worthiness and separateness, if we imagine that the former is a function of the feeble pull of the good, whereas the latter is under the influence of the 'Niagara-force' of the ego. But what is there in separateness which is either damaging to artistic integrity or potentially immoral?

One conversation between Bradley and Arnold is particularly revealing here. They are arguing about whether Bradley ought to admit ex-doctor Marloe to his narrow circle of aquaintances. I shall quote a longish chunk of it because it allows us to make an independent assessment of Arnold's moral and artistic standing, which up to now we have had to accept mainly in Bradley's terms. Arnold is speaking first:

> 'Disapproving of things is all right. But you musn't disapprove of people. It cuts you off.'
>
> 'I want to be cut off from people like Marloe. Being a real person oneself is a matter of setting up limits and drawing lines and saying no. I don't want to be a nebulous bit of ectoplasm straying around in other people's lives. That sort of vague sympathy with everybody precludes any real understanding of anybody.'
>
> 'The sympathy needn't be vague -'
>
> 'And it precludes any real loyalty to anybody.'
>
> 'One must know the details. Justice, after all -'
>
> 'I detest chatter and gossip. One must hold one's tongue. Even sometimes just *not think* about people. Real thoughts come out of silence.'
>
> 'Bradley, not that, please. *Listen!* I was saying justice demands details. You say you aren't interested in why he was struck off the register. You ought to be! You say he's some sort of scoundrel. I'd like to be told what sort. You obviously don't know ... you mustn't reject people, you musn't just write them off. You must be curious about them. Curiosity is a kind of charity.'

> 'I don't think curiosity is a kind of charity. I think it's a kind of malice.'
> 'That's what makes a writer, knowing the details.'
> 'It may make your kind of writer. It doesn't make mine.'
> 'Here we go again,' said Arnold. (79)

This puts a new complexion on Bradley's famed reluctance to 'profane the purity of a single page with anything less than ... what is true' (80). Eclectic Arnold is certainly flawed in these terms, but he does exhibit vital qualities which Bradley lacks. Arnold likes *details*, but Bradley would rather avoid them, especially when they don't suit his needs. The most extreme example of this failing occurs when Bradley ignores the phone call telling him of Priscilla's death. He does so on the grounds that the call was

> a pure accident, a mere contingent by-product of my carelessness ... so little determined, so casually caused, it made it seem that much less real, that much easier to obliterate from history. (81)

But the good artist tries to reconcile the contingent, not reject it. And so too the good man. Thus the inconvenient phone call, which Bradley dismisses as an 'utter irrelevance' (82) to what he sees as the destined pattern of his love for Julian, is nevertheless *relevant* enough, when its absence is reported, to destroy that relationship.

Attention to detail is an important virtue in both life and art. In one of her essays, Murdoch cites approvingly a remark of Tolstoy's: 'Strip the best novels of our times of their details and what will remain?' (83). Details are everything. Thus Arnold scores highly on both moral and artistic counts. Arnold craves *justice*, and Bradley is paid back for not respecting justice by being wrongly accused of Arnold's murder. Bradley is eager to *write people off* (a resonant expression in this context) at one point even tearing up Arnold's collected works. But Arnold is much more reticent in this respect, responding with intelligence and humility to the bad review which Bradley gives to his latest novel. But Bradley is again repaid, with interest, by the postscripts at the end of The Black Prince - the novel Bradley writes - which write *him* off.

So Bradley's urge for 'purity' is here revealed to be a symptom of a general coldness and a desire to 'cut off' others who may be about to make emotional or other demands upon him. There is a chillness too in his ultra-detached style of describing events which evoke, or threaten to evoke, emotional excitement, such as his response to Rachel making a pass at him:

> I seemed to be outside, seeing myself as in a picture, a fully dressed elderly man in a dark suit and a blue tie lying beside a pink pear-shaped lady. (84)

He speaks of 'drawing lines' and of 'not wanting to be a nebulous bit of ectoplasm straying around in other people's lives', but this is often just what he *does* want, as betrayed by his response to Rachel's emotional letter: 'Why did women have to make things so definite?' (85) Like Hilary Burde, he wants, as it were, to rigidly police his own borders, but stray willy-nilly into other people's territories when it suits him. This anxiety about being overcome by strong emotions is paralleled by his fear of involuntary acts, a symptom of which is the energy he puts into bettering them through language, as in his description of vomiting, the humour here located in the gap between the controlled language and the beyond-control act being described:

> One cannot argue. One is *seized*. And the fact that one's vomit moves with such a remarkable drive contrary to the force of gravity adds to the sense of being taken and shaken by some alien power. (86)

The key word here is tolerance. Bradley will not tolerate other values or points of view*, or try to embrace awkward contingent detail, or give up any measure of control - except in, for him, the significant area of feeling 'under orders' (87), and of wanting to make, as Arnold explains it, 'a life drama' (88) out of his writing vocation. But tolerance is a crucial virtue for both the artist and the moral agent. In interview Murdoch has praised Shakespeare as perhaps the greatest exponent of this virtue in art:

> I think that a great artist has got great tolerance, because he can see a lot of what is really there ... There is a kindly breath of tolerance which comes out of Shakespeare, because he can see so much. He can see how different people are, and what makes them different, and how many different ways there are of thinking about the world. (89)

This lack of tolerance in Bradley, and the unconscious corrupting of his superficially commendable notions of 'purity', mark the fundamental distance between Bradley and his creator. 'Good artists can be bad men' (90), Murdoch warns us in The Fire and the Sun, which divides her from Bradley's assertion that 'a work of art is as good as its creator'. (91)

That this division is difficult to see is a function of Bradley's great fluency, his ability, as the putative reader marvels, to 'intoxicate himself' (and us) 'with words'. And the issue is further obscured by Bradley's relationship with his muse. Bradley sees artistic endeavour in terms of the Apollo and Marsyas myth. Marsyas, a flute player, challenges Apollo, god of music and poetry, to a contest of skill. Marsyas plays better than he has ever played before but is defeated in the contest, and flayed alive for his presumption. Via Hamlet, who, in Shakespeare's play, is 'the god's

flayed victim dancing the dance of creation' (92), Bradley identifies with Marsyas' consuming passion to excel.

Elizabeth Dipple takes up this allusion (93), pointing out that Bradley misinterprets the myth, seeing it as an image of *suffering* for the sake of art, whereas what is really demanded is the *death* of the artist (Marsyas, in fact, dies). And it is only later, when Bradley, with the death of his sister, is forced to review his notions of art and morality, that he concedes: 'The false god punishes, the true god slays.' (94) Death, the ultimate silence, is the final touchstone for artistic and moral excellence: the absence of the author in the former, and the extinction of the personality in the latter.

Apollo is really a misnomer* for a more mysterious figure, the eponymous Black Prince, the dark Eros of Plato's Symposium. Dipple comments:

> Bradley interprets this figure narrowly as a certain kind of creative energy ... he misunderstands the nature of his relationship to this external god who rules not only the creation of art, but also the erotic centre of all human beings ... Bradley is wrong not only about the nature of artistic inspiration and what is required of the artist in terms of participation and observation, but also about the composition of his own erotic self. (95)

Bradley's failure to grasp 'the nature of his relationship' with this complex figure is early spotted by Arnold, who accuses Bradley of being 'a masochist' about art (96); and Bradley's self-cast role as 'the god's flayed victim' throws light upon what Murdoch says in The Sovereignty of Good about the sado-masochistic relationship:

> It is the peculiar subtlety of this system that, while constantly leading attention and energy back into the self, it can produce, almost all the way as it were to the summit, plausible imitations of what is good. (97)

Murdoch here, using the language of the Cave, is talking about the kind of martyrdom which at first glance looks like uncomplaining self-sacrifice, but which on closer acquaintance is often revealed as an insidious form of self-aggrandisement, deeply corrupting to both parties. We have all seen examples of such behaviour: Martin Lynch-Gibbon playing 'the virtuous aggrieved husband so as to keep Palmer and Antonia in [his] power' (98) is a clear example of spurious self-sacrifice; and aspects of the Priscilla-Roger relationship in The Black Prince fall into the same category.

What is so interesting about The Black Prince is that Murdoch shows how, with Bradley and his muse, sado-masochism, with its own 'plausible imitations of what is good', can exist in art too. And perhaps the only

way to break that circle of corruption is to adopt Arnold's policy: 'I have no muse' (99).

Brilliantly combining the spheres of art and morality, Bradley is Murdoch's most articulate spokesman so far to attempt 'the pilgrimage from appearance to reality' (100). And yet his articulacy is not enough to save him from self-delusion; in fact, as we have seen, the tendency is for Bradley, despite his best intentions, to build an impregnable fortress of words around his self, shielding it from reality.

Thus, to picture Bradley in terms of the Platonic myth, while appearing to strike out boldly on the steep ascent out of the cave and towards the land of perfection and truth, he is actually, until near the end of the book, only becoming more firmly entrenched by the fire. This is figured in his procrastinations when attempting to leave his flat, his 'sunless and cosy womb' (101), 'my darling burrow for a countryside which I had never visited' (102). Bradley's vision is lowered, turned inward, and contingent horrors such as the glimpse of violence in the Baffin marriage, and Priscilla's misery, only cause him to withdraw further his limited sympathies. Priscilla senses something of this when she provides her own explanation for Bradley's artistic 'block': 'no wonder you can't write real books - you don't see - the horror -' (103).

Bradley's reform commences when he realises he is in love with Julian, which experience he describes as being like a 'blaze of light', a dazzling 'emergence from the cave' (104) and 'a vision of selflessness' (105). But to put this access of light in perspective, we must return to Conradi's comment about 'the "illusions" of love'. Bradley's raised quality of vision is valuable, but has the character of a pencil-thin beam. It requires to be 'democratised, spread more evenly'. As Conradi puts it, brilliantly evoking both the energy potential of Eros and the myth of the Cave in his turn:

> Erotic love provokes tunnel vision ... Priscilla dies of this inequitable distribution of love energy. (106)

In The Black Prince a satisfying balance is struck overall. The murder which almost happened at the begining, happens, with a neat ironic reversal, at the end. Bradley unexpectedly takes on the mantle of guilt for this crime as the 'ordeal' he has been waiting for to release his talent, and his great novel gets written. But, as he has learned, suffering is a false ordeal, and his true rite-of-passage is through silence and death. So he dies, and all of his articulate exposition in the story is compromised by a

string of postscripts from the other players, each re-writing the tale to their own specifications. A great dark silence descends upon Bradley.

And yet the percipient reader is not deluded. 'Editor' P. Loxias (lux = light), who closes The Black Prince, reminds us of a light source by which we can see and evaluate what we have read. His words are mysterious and yet resonant:

> Art tells the only truth that ultimately matters. It is the light by which human things can be mended. And after art there is, let me assure you, nothing. (107)

However, in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine (1974), the latest of Murdoch's noticeably 'Freudian' novels, no such satisfying balance is permitted us, and this has something to do with the nature of Harriet's death. Her systematic betrayal is one of the most painful episodes in the whole of Murdoch's fiction, emphasised as it is by the relative success of everyone else in the book. What seems particularly cruel is the chance killing of Harriet by terrorists, which, as Conradi points out (108), strikes readers as shocking and arbitrary. What remains is the ruthless smugness of the survivors: Emily, Blaise's mistress, saying 'How awfully considerate of Mrs P[a]cid to go off and get herself massacred' (109); the 'swift mechanical efficiency' of Blaise's egoism, which allows him to shrug off his part in Harriet's death; and his 'cutting off the little hands or tentacles of dreadful pity which were reaching up at him from the grave.' (110)* The book challenges our sense of poetic justice, our desire to see Blaise, Harriet's husband, punished and Harriet rewarded.

This interpretation assumes that the impact of the ending is one of thwarted reader-expectation. But I would go further and say that this ending is evidence of a new kind of tolerance# in Murdoch herself. Bradley, in 'the pilgrimage from appearance to reality', makes mistakes and, in a sense, pays for those mistakes with his own demise. But in The Sacred and Profane, where the same migration is implicit, and similar mistakes are made, the culprits, unlike Bradley, are permitted to live on with their mistakes.

I mean here that Murdoch seems to have a lot of patience with self-delusion, Blaise's in particular, retailing the workings of his divided mind, and showing him a level of sympathy which she never afforded to Palmer Anderson. 'On the whole', says Palmer, '"do what you want" costs others less than "do what you ought"' (111). Because we are never granted access to Palmer's inner thoughts, such assertions about personal responsibility seem cold and glib, and a gulf exists between author and creation. Blaise would probably agree with Palmer, but with Blaise we hear the wheels of

conscience grind and crunch, and the friction tends to show itself as authorial warmth. Here he is trying to justify to himself his marriage to Harriet and his secret affair with Emily:

> He led a double life. Did that make him a liar? He did not feel a liar. He was a man of two truths, since both these lives were valuable and true. Thus went his exasperation ... There seemed to be something noble in this, an heroic exercise of power as if he were a sort of interiorized Atlas, holding the two ends of the earth apart by sheer strength. Unfortunately this image in turn suggested that of Samson. And his dilemma now sometimes expressed itself in the feeling that he could only end it all by ending himself. (112)

But Blaise does not 'end himself', in fact his self is shown to flourish at the end, even basking complacently in the warmth of the 'perpetual bonfire' (113) of Harriet's belongings. But this gloating image of barbarous victory belies the ingenuity which Murdoch invests in getting us to believe in and sympathise with this 'man of two truths'.

Blaise Gavender, like Palmer, is a psychoanalyst, a 'modern magician', and an articulate spokesman for life as lived by the Fire$. Like Bradley, he has a kind of world-weary awareness of the hazards of introspection: 'He knew the muck heap of other people's minds. He knew the muck heap of his own.' (114)

Blaise's problem is that he cannot reconcile his public life with Harriet with his private life with Emily. The double aspects of Blaise's life go on and on: he has two houses, one on either side of the Thames, and two sons, one legitimate and one illegitimate.

Blaise confesses that, though he loved Harriet when he married her, he deliberately stumbled into a union which was second best, and in doing so 'committed the sin against the Holy Ghost ... by wilfully excluding the possibility of perfection' (115). Emily is a fresh source of, often dubiously retrospective, radiation for Blaise. She represents, in his mind, a dangerously schematic notion, the possibility of perfection. With Emily in mind he begins to apply a new system of meanings in his life:

> All this he saw in the illumination of the dark rays of his glinting girl. Could one doubt the absolute *incarnate* truth when confronted by it, as by God? ... So in leading Emily to think that Harriet was unattractive and ageing (he even exaggerated her age for Emily's benefit) and that his relations with Harriet had become empty, in letting Emily picture Harriet as a stupid fat cow and a snob, he had again not exactly been lying, for these images in Emily represented something which was true in him, though not exactly true of Harriet. In any case were these in any sense lies? There is a level (not necessarily the deepest one) in any marriage where love fails. Emily was a chemical which showed up what had been previously concealed, not making the rest false, but completing the picture. (116)

I quote this longish extract because it gives an impression of the subtle equivocation which occurs in Blaise's mind. The strings of tortuous, qualified statements and questions appear to hold back, like a 'civilised' dam, the urgent vulgarity of cunningly disowned statements such as 'stupid fat cow'. This is hate by proxy of the cleverest kind. Notice too that Blaise does not regard truth as a universal quality, but something which may operate in one place without necessarily operating in another. The equivocation, and Blaise's ability to, as it were, *target* truths to particular sites gives the book the feel of an espionage thriller in places. Blaise explains his partitioned world, significantly, just at the moment when he is passing from one side to the other, thus:

> Crossing the river was always a bad moment. People sometimes wonder how spies can live an ordinary life. Blaise knew. One simply divided one's mind in two and built impenetrable barriers between the two parts. (117)

Certainly there is a lot of spying in the book: Luca, the illegitimate son, comes to spy on his 'legitimate' counterparts, who in turn spy upon him; David, the legitimate son, is taken by Pinn to spy on naked schoolgirls, and David also spies on his mother at the railway station. Blaise comes to regard his work in psychiatry as a piece of self-indulgent voyeurism, with each school of thought a 'magic garden ... surrounded by its own high wall' (118).

Other facets of the genre abound too. There is the elaborate alibi created by Monty Small to cover Blaise's movements, his consultations with the fictitious Magnus Bowles; and Monty's other alter ego, the Chandleresque fictional private detective, Milo Fane. Identities are concealed or doubled: one of Harriet's menagerie of dogs 'thought he was a human being' (119). Images of terrorism are also present: Monty thinks of his shadow-self, Milo, as a 'terror' (120); Blaise imagines that Harriet finding out about Emily will 'end in a huge explosion' (121); and Harriet's brave reaction to Blaise's eventual confession is to 'stay upright now in the gunfire' (122). In fact one of the startling ironies of the book is that Harriet *is* killed by gunfire.

The description of Emily as 'a chemical which showed up what had been previously concealed' (123) is interesting and links Blaise to the character of Dr. Jekyll in the Stevenson story, who uses a chemical concoction to liberate his darker side, Edward Hyde, to go off and enjoy itself, unhampered by Jekyll's conscience. Dr. Jekyll's testimony reveals his fault to have been one of pride, such that he found his private indulgences, though not excessive when compared to those of other men,

> hard to reconcile with my imperious desire to carry my head high, and wear a more than commonly grave countenance before the public. Hence it came about that I concealed my pleasures ... It was thus rather the exacting nature of my aspirations, than any particular degradation in my faults, that made me what I was, and ... severed in me those provinces of good and ill which divide and compound man's dual nature ... [the truth is] that man is not truly one, but truly two. (124)

As with Dr. Jekyl, Blaise Gavender's particular aberrations are no more than hinted at. What is important is, not what he does, but the fact that he conceals and *disowns* it: once back in his marital home, Hood House, Blaise's other home in Putney 'seemed hardly to exist' (125), and vice versa; just as Dr. Jekyll, in his house in a respectable part of London, is able to disregard Hyde in his squalid Soho lodgings. There is a strong atmosphere of double dealing, espionage and an invasion by the occult: the book is full of 'hauntings', not all of which are given rational explanations. Fiction and reality blur, such as in the painfully ironic exchanges between Blaise and Harriet, when he reports on the progress of the non-existent Magnus Bowles. Harriet is speaking first:

> 'Did he say anything about me?'
> 'He said, "give my respects to the lady".'
> 'I love the way he calls me the lady, it's like something in a legend. I feel I very much exist for Magnus. I'm sure I could help him just by talking to him a bit.' (126)

The same conversation reveals a great deal about the quality of what Blaise can see 'in the illumination of the dark rays of his glinting girl' (127). Magnus, he says, has a recurrent dream of turning into an egg. Blaise explains it thus:

> 'It's connected to his compulsive eating. Men who are failures often disguise their castration fears as a desire to engulf everything. When you've swallowed the world there's nothing left to be frightened of. It's the pattern of the failed artist.' (128)

This smacks of the glibness of a Francis Marloe analysis. We cannot test the egg dream against Magnus, for Magnus is an invention, but we are invited to test it against Harriet* - a juxtaposition which Blaise, though in the best position to do so, fails to make. Cowardice, self-absorption, and a tendency to fish for Freudian myths rather than, as Bradley Pearson noted, 'the horror of confronting a unique human history' (129), cause Blaise to completely underestimate Harriet's response to the revelation of his double life. Blaise imagines that Harriet's knowing will result in a 'huge explosion', but Monty's estimation is more true to Harriet's character: 'Your ordeal is that it won't. You'll all go on existing, sleeping and

eating and going to the lavatory' (130). In fact Harriet's response is very positive. Far from rejecting Blaise and his secret menagerie, her generous response is to absorb them into her world:

> Harriet needed to do everything that she could to make Emily real. To only half believe in Emily would have been agony. That would have been to try to live partly in a happy past which no longer existed. Harriet's own realism, her sort of strong spiritual domestic economy, demanded a complete acceptance of the new scene and a detailed vision of it. Harriet needed to swallow Emily whole. (131)

Placed against Magnus's macrophagic egg dream, this insight does much to illuminate Harriet's deep need to retain her strong matriarchal position and also her self-image as 'a good person ... always able to act rightly.' (132) The authorial irony applied to Harriet is of the gentlest kind: the expression 'spiritual domestic economy' being a milder version of Antonia's 'metaphysics of the drawing room' (133). Blaise, reading Harriet's liberality strictly in terms of a miraculous escape from his own guilt, calls it 'saintliness' (134). But Harriet discovers the limits of her liberality when Blaise is eventually bullied by Emily into leaving Harriet and opting for life with her. Robbed of a sustaining role in Blaise's life, Harriet finds herself in a vacuum where she cannot use her qualities: 'For a situation where she was not needed she had no heroism.' (135)

Up until this point the reader's sympathies are largely engaged with Blaise's problems: What will he do? Which way will he turn? We tend to think of Harriet in Emily-Blaise terms as 'Mrs Placid' (136), as a fat complacent obstacle in Blaise's life. As the book goes on we are obliged to reject this estimation and to begin to reassess her, even with her limitations, as a much more complex entity than Blaise has allowed us to believe. We have to see her in a stronger illumination than the 'dark rays' by which Blaise views things. In this sense, reliance on Blaise's vision has the same problems that Blaise suspected applied to the different schools of psychoanalytical theory: his consciousness is just one of 'so many magic gardens, each with its own flora and its own design, and each surrounded by its own high wall'. (137)

At the moment we begin to see Harriet more justly, to, as it were, begin to look around in *her* garden, the central figures in her life - Blaise, David, Monty and Edgar Demarnay - begin to draw back from her. Even the fictitious Magnus Bowles deserts her, suddenly written out of her life by Monty. Harriet panics and runs from the horrible vacuum created round her, and is soon removed altogether by a terrorist's bullet.

With ease and glee, Blaise and the others - Emily, Edgar and Monty - regroup the disordered forces of their psyches. Blaise, for instance, views the shooting as 'unendurably accidental, and later as fated' (138), and it is not long before he thinks up a retrospective controller of that 'fate', in the person of Monty:

> Really the whole thing was his doing, something he just did to amuse himself. He made my thing with Emily possible by inventing Magnus Bowles, and he made Harriet run away by killing him ... like a dreaming god, making awful things happen in a sort of trance. (139)

And Edgar, too, who confesses his part in Harriet's undoing by admitting 'I preferred a ghost to reality' (140), bounces back very quickly when he discovers he has some new admirers: 'Three good-looking women, he thought, and all of them after *me*!' (141) It is as though reality and real goodness can go hang, as far as the core of our selves is concerned, so long as there is the *appearance* of good ('good-looking') to be going on with. And indeed this seems to connect with Bradley's remark that 'the average man ... covets only apparent good.' (142)

So far in this account there has been a sense of Iris Murdoch's wariness towards the promptings of the ego, and a recurrent emphasis on the specifications of a selfless kind of love. However, Edgar forgiving himself here at the end of The Sacred and Profaneseems very much like an uncharacteristic authorial blessing, and I would like to take this up in the following chapter, for, in Conradi's words, it marks a stage in 'a new phase of ironic benevolence about the urgencies of the ego' (143). As we shall shortly see, that 'benevolence' is really a function of Murdoch's deepening awareness of the democratic basis of the pilgrimage.

CHAPTER THREE: Democracy in *The Bell*, *An Unofficial Rose* and *Nuns and Soldiers*

> And if he were compelled to look at the light itself, would that not pain his eyes, and would he not turn away and flee to those things which he is able to discern and regard them as in very deed more clear and exact than the objects pointed out ... And if ... someone should drag him thence by force up the ascent which is rough and steep ... do you not think that he would find it painful to be so haled along? (1)

The third stage of enlightenment, in the Platonic myth, occurs when the prisoner renounces the comforting warmth and the adequate-for-ordinary-purposes light of the fire and sets out on the hard pilgrimage towards the cave mouth. The ease and companionship of the campfire is contrasted with the lonely nature of his venture and the colder, harsher light towards which he must set his face. The light hurts the eyes at first, but by persistence and habituation the pilgrim is eventually able to make out some things by the roadside. But being a stronger, clearer* and steadier light than that cast by the fire, he is able to see these objects more clearly than he was ever able to at the fireside. They thus appear more like themselves; in Platonic terms, more real.

The uncompanionable 'guide' which Plato mentions may be thought of as the example or teaching of others, or the promptings of the pilgrim's own conscience, but the specifically Platonic meaning is that the guide is a deep inner craving after a world of absolute values - a world our souls still retain an indistinct memory of - a craving for the good#. 'Our home is elsewhere and it draws us like a magnet', says the character Plato in Murdoch's dialogue-for-stage, Acastos (2).

To convert this into less mythical language, the pilgrim relinquishes a system of values which essentially has the self (the fire) as its radiant centre, and opts for the much harder discipline of a value system based on 'the other'. 'Not I but Christ' (3) is the religious formulation commonly met with. The secular equivalent involves words such as humility, altruism, self-denial and self-effacement, and the qualities which go along with those words include an outward-looking vision, a developed faculty of attention, and an imagination capable of grasping the needs and the sufferings of others. The journey undertaken in Plato's myth is from inner to outer, and this, it ought to be stressed, is also the direction recommended for the *vision* to be practised:

> The argument for looking outward at Christ and not inward at Reason is that self is such a dazzling object that if one looks *there* one may see nothing else ... Where virtue is concerned we

> often apprehend more than we clearly understand and grow by looking. (4)

The perils of looking into the fire, that is to say, of self-scrutiny, were discussed in the previous chapter, and the hazards of looking directly at the sun will be discussed in the next, but it is worth noting here that the metaphor suggests there is danger involved in looking *directly* at any light source. The thing to do - and this is what our eyes automatically do for us anyway - is to look, not at the source, but at the things seen *in the light of* that source*.

I shall take for illustration three Murdoch novels in which characters undertake the 'rough and steep' ascent. Michael Meade in The Bell (1958), is a man with 'an insatiable thirst for the good' (5). His sincere wish to divest himself of power and to embrace the good life is shown to be at odds with the demands made upon him as acting leader of a religious community and some unfinished business from his past life. Spiritual pride is revealed as a factor in the drama of choosing between the 'lower' and 'higher' acts (6). Anne Peronet's position as an acknowledged 'good person' (7) at the hub of An Unofficial Rose (1962) will be examined: her patient negativity, her 'formlessness' (8), and the implications for novel-writing of having a 'good' person at or near the centre of the stage.

One aspect of the steep ascent is the isolation and alienation it seems to entail, and this will be discussed in Nuns and Soldiers (1980), where Anne Cavidge, unsatisfied with convent life, returns to the world as 'a secret anchoress' (9), and the Count's connections with his surroundings amount to hardly more than 'a little English jest' (10) at his expense. The concept of 'at-homeness in the world' (11) will be tackled in the light of Conradi's objections to Dipple's 'Calvinism wholly at odds with Iris Murdoch's own generosity' (12) in an attempt to correct the impression that goodness is something that can only be achieved by an elite few: Murdoch's own approach, it will be argued, is altogether more democratic.

This chapter will also examine the re-reading of Plato's parable by the French writer Luce Irigaray (as presented by Johnson [13]), to which she brings a feminist reading. Irigaray claims that the parable has become an arena for the eternal war between the male and the female, the 'divine paternal logos envisaged in the parable as the sun' being opposed by the cave itself, which she terms 'the forgotten vagina' (14). I will try to show that the oppositions Irigaray claims to see are not present in the original myth, or in Murdoch's use and interpretation of it, but can be traced to a sexist misreading of the parable, which is possibly present in the minds of some of Murdoch's characters.

In The Bell we meet Michael Meade, an intelligent and sensitive person who has turned his back on ordinary life and opted for a more austere existence in a kind of 'buffer state' (15) between the material and spiritual worlds. His quest for goodness takes the conventional form of a religious vocation, but his ponderings about the nature of goodness, stirred up as they are by a need to reconcile his calling with his intrusive sexual nature, range far and wide. He is no simple-minded fundamentalist, like his colleague James Tayper-Pace, who professes that

> '... truth is not glorious, it is just enjoined; sodomy is not disgusting, it is just forbidden. These are the rules by which we should freely judge ourselves and others too.' (16)

Instead, while continually struggling to renounce the force of his own personality, and believing that goodness lies in the direction of such renunciations, Michael must balance this belief with his position as leader of a community: should they, as respecters of all creatures great and small, condone the shooting of the pigeons which destroy their crops? should they, having 'set themselves apart fom the world to follow Adam's trade of digging and delving' (17) equip themselves with a mechanical cultivator? Michael has strong views on these issues and has the power to decide them, but his scruples cause him to hold back in the exercise of that power. How to withdraw his own self and renounce power, while honouring his position, is thus a large problem in Michael's daily life:

> Michael had always held the view that the good man is without power. He held to this view passionately although at times he scarcely knew what it meant, and could connect it with his daily actions only tenuously or not at all. (18)

This makes Michael a candidate for Plato's pilgrim struggling up the tricky slope leading to the light at the mouth of the cave. 'Haled along' (19) by his 'insatiable thirst for the good' (20), Michael endeavours to renounce the fire of his own self and recognise the needs of others. The slope is 'rough and steep' (21) in the sense that the path indicated by his spiritual promptings is almost invisible to him, whereas to give in to his own self and to see things *in that light* would be the far easier course to take.

Michael's history is that his early priestly ambitions were shattered when, working as a schoolmaster, the authorities discovered a 'liason' between himself and a boy pupil, Nick Fawley. Michael is disgraced, time passes, but by the opening of the book his ambitions have revived to the extent that he is now the leader of Imber Court, a lay community attached to Imber Abbey, which houses an enclosed order of Anglican nuns. With the arrival at the Court of Nick's sister, Catherine, soon to enter the Abbey as

a postulant, and then of Nick himself, an exile from a life of dissipation in the City, Michael cannot help thinking that the fragments of his life are being reassembled for mending by some benign agency:

> ... with the dawning of a strange joy he apprehended in the way things had gone a certain pattern of good. Nick had been brought back to him, surely by no accident ... He was, after all, where Nick was concerned, to have a second chance. He could not be meant to reject it. The thing chimed in so exactly with Catherine's departure from the world. A being of such purity, as he now in exalted mood saw her, might indeed effect the salvation of her brother, and in some ways his own as well, and miraculously the redemption of the past. (22)

The tenor of Michael's past has been one of unlucky accidents and painful denials, a contingent muddle, but suddenly he finds a way to restructure his history to form a 'pattern of good' in which the reappearance of Nick, previously viewed with horror, is a reason for rejoicing. A consequence of the 'pattern' is that Michael has neatened the whole 'redemption' process off in his mind by picturing it as an arrival (of Nick from the City to the Court) and a departure (of Catherine from the Court to the Abbey) with himself as a spectator 'destined ... to stand by, as one who has a small part in some great ceremony' (23). This picture divests Michael of responsibility and locates Catherine as the agent of change, while reserving for himself the almost passive role of a kind of humble intercessor, in fact a *priestly* role, which of course is exactly his old ambition.

When Michael and Nick are eventually brought together, no magical 'redemption' of the sort envisaged by Michael ever takes place, whereas it becomes obvious to the reader that Nick (and, later, Catherine too) is in desperate need of some kind of frank conversation with Michael: some means of helping to dispel his own crippling burden of resentful guilt for the part he played in ruining Michael's career, and also for expressing the tormented love he still feels for Michael. Michael repeatedly ignores Nick's cues to speak, and Nick later kills himself* as a last act of despair. Michael's self-generated and consoling 'pattern' has blinded him to a reality which demanded his attention.

I think we are deliberately meant to compare the dubious and self-serving complexity of Michael's thoughts with the ultimately simple and other-serving impulse of Dora Greenfield on the train. On the crowded train Dora has a seat. A frail elderly lady gets on and has to stand. Dora has a full page of text expended upon her mental deliberations over whether or not to give up her seat. The passage ends,

> She regarded her state of distress as completely neurotic. She decided not to give up her seat. (24)

This is the equivalent of Michael's sticking-point, opting for the selfish choice after a lot of rational or pseudo-rational justifications. However, the next paragraph begins,

> She got up and said to the standing lady 'Do sit down here please.' (25)

The lady is relieved and grateful, and Dora glows with a delight which is 'the unhoped-for reward of the virtuous act' (26). This triumph of the simple selfless impulse over the selfish convolutions of thought is a kind of early touchstone in the book for the kind of behaviour which rightly belongs to the good man - and an indication of just how deluded Michael is in thinking himself to be one.

It is easy to see how, despite his intentions, Michael's absorption in the drama of his own history disqualifies him as a character of the good. The Sovereignty of Good gives us some guidelines as to how we might identify Murdoch's characters of the good:

> What is a good man like? ... Goodness appears to be both rare and hard to picture. It is perhaps most convincingly met with in simple people - inarticulate unselfish mothers of large families - but these are also the least illuminating. (27)

In these terms Ann Peronett in An Unofficial Rose would seem to qualify. She has the kind of straightforward nature which makes her universally trusted, in contrast to her husband, Randall, Mildred and Hugh, who are shown to have great resources of cunning and duplicity. She is inarticulate and unselfish in that she is unable and/or unwilling to consciously formulate her needs and wants, and is constantly putting the needs and wants of others before her own. She does not have a large family, but she does have a large spread of pressing obligations, which include the rose nursery she runs almost single-handed, and her difficult daughter. There is no sense that her self-effacement - and this is the real test of her simplicity - is a deliberate self-matyrdom intended to seem like virtue while actually being a means of tormenting the husband who has deserted her. Hugh, her father-in-law, would like to think this, but is forced to recognise how unfair that judgement would be. We see his resentment fading as he tries to focus in on a finer definition of her:

> 'She is - a faithful wife.' He added, 'She's a conventional person.' He seemed dissatisfied with this and added, 'She's a *good* person.' (28)

This idea of focussing in on people is important in this novel. We might wonder why the classic example of 'goodness' Murdoch gives in The Sovereignty of Good should be 'also the least illuminating', but Hugh

articulates the problem very well with regard to Ann when he notices that her quality of self-effacement has caused her to 'become invisible' (29) to those around her. It is not merely that she is taken for granted, but that because she seems to lack some essential vigour, a substantial forceful personality, she becomes, among the stronger characters, a kind of hole in the proceedings. As she acknowledges in the case of the son who died, 'since the others wanted to blame someone and she did not, she made a vacuum into which the blame ran.' (30) It is as though goodness is invisible to all but the keenest gaze, and where the gaze is less than keen, goodness becomes a blank or dark area, and only attractive as a dumping ground for irrational resentment.

Michael Meade was flawed by a tendency to dramatise his life, to organise it into a meaningful pattern. Douglas Swann warns Ann against such a failing when he tells her

> 'We must not expect our lives to have a visible shape ... Goodness accepts the contingent. Love accepts the contingent. Nothing is more fatal to love than to want everything to have form.' (31)

This is an extremely Murdochian standpoint and compares well with statements she made in 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited':

> According to Sartre, a desire for our lives to have the form and clarity of something necessary, not accidental, is a fundamental human urge.' (32)

Sartre tended to applaud this trait as something vitally human, but Murdoch deplores it as a deep human failing which needs to be acknowledged and resisted.

Ann, in fact, with her great patience and tolerance, very much exemplifies this 'formless' ideal. Dipple draws attention to the fact that such formless characters, placed at the centre of a drama, as Ann is, tend to prevent the development of a satisfactory structure within the work, and for this reason 'the good characters live offstage and create in themselves no drama, no scenes' (33). Ann is thus unique and something of a paradox in being a character of the good placed at the centre of a Murdoch novel. We can see what is meant here when we think of James Arrowby, Arthur Fisch or Theo Gray, good characters very far from the dramatic centres of the novels they appear in. And conversely, the organising centres of those novels - the directors, to stay within the acting metaphor - Charles Arrowby, Hilary Burde and John Ducane, are characters where, as Dipple puts it, 'the structure and machinery of the self give form to the personality'

(34). Ann, with her attenuated 'machinery', seems mischosen as an organising centre.

Dipple criticises An Unofficial Rose for this reason - Ann is 'too pallid in interest' (35) to hold centre stage - and Byatt for the reverse reason: that Murdoch's 'formal' characters, especially Randall and Lindsay, are too cardboardy to be on equal terms with her 'good' ones (36). Neither critic regards the novel as particularly successful, but it is interesting that they both view the problem as some kind of war between form and formlessness, and indeed the often-quoted passage from An Unofficial Rose is Randall's outburst comparing Ann to a formless dogrose:

> 'I ought to have people around me who have *wills*, people who take what they want. Ann has no will. She saps my energy. She makes me soft ... For someone else she may be a bloody little angel. But for me she's the destroyer, and the destroyer is the devil. She's got a kind of openness which makes whatever I do meaningless ... I need a different world, a formal world ... form, structure, will, something to encounter, something to make me *be*. Form as this rose has it. That's what Ann hasn't got. She's as messy and flabby and open as a bloody dogrose. That's what gets me down. That's what destroys all my imagination, all the bloody footholds.' (37)

As Hugh noted, whenever goodness is regarded with an unsympathetic eye, a blankness or darkness prevails, in this case Ann the angel becoming Ann the devil. Randall the artist - creator of the rose nursery and also playwright - has a particularly unsympathetic eye. Despite this - and indeed, because of it - he is widely admired as someone with imagination, with splendid artistic vision, and with the courage to reach out and grasp that vision. Some of the artist's joy in creation is well conveyed in his thought·s about the rose nursery as he mourns the loss of it:

> Lifting a few towards him he looked with his ever new amazement at the close packed patterns of petals, those formulae that Nature never forgot, those forms that were the most desirable of all things and so exquisite that it was impossible to carry them in belief and memory through the winter; so that every year one saw them as if for the first time, and as they must have looked in the Garden of Eden when in a felicitous moment God said: let there be roses. (38)

In comparison there is something dead and joyless in Ann's absorption in the practical drudgery of the nursery, as if indeed the whole enterprise is drained of life and meaning once Randall's inspiration is withdrawn. I feel that one idea which An Unofficial Rose projects is the need for individuals not to abandon form altogether in their lives, but instead to strike some kind of balance betwen form and formlessness - particularly *these* individuals, whose mostly moneyed lives exempt many of them from a major

conferrer of structure and meaning in life - a job to go to. Ann suffers from too little form, Randall from too much. We can see Randall's obsession with form in his thoughts about Lindsay:

> She was shapely and complete; and like a kaleidoscope, like a complex rose, her polychrome being fell into an authoritative pattern which proclaimed her free. (39)

Byatt attacks Murdoch here for 'pretentious writing' which 'relates to nothing in Lindsay which we see acted out which might support Randall's use of such high words of her' (40). A classic case, one might agree, of being told a thing when one really ought to be shown it in operation, and an example of what Byatt describes as Murdoch's being 'in the grip of the theory that there should be no theory' (41).

I have some sympathy with Byatt's general point, but I think her specific criticism here rather misses the point. We actually *do* see a practical demonstration of Randall's formophyllic nature, but the point is that Randall's high words are mocked by the crude motivation which Lindsay takes no trouble to conceal:

> She looked at him sombrely, and as he gazed in supplication he seemed to see another symbol taking shape in her eyes, as if her beloved initial, on which he had used to meditate as upon one of the names of God, had transformed itself into the relevant question.
>
> 'Money,' he said. 'Yes.' (42)

It is Randall's attempt to clothe the violence and the ugliness of his act in the language of a spiritual experience or of courtly love which creates the irony here. This and his painful collisions with the real consequences of his act - such as the painful interview with his daughter in Chapter 22 - add, I think, a lot of depth to Randall's character, which Byatt describes as one-dimensional (43).

To move to the other extreme, Ann's formlessness is a hugely interesting phenomenon, for it seems to beg to be shaped by the current of discreet sexual politics which quietly seethes around her, and also by a strong positive impulse which Ann is holding in check. In a scene where Ann, 'the spirit which was always saying no' (44), is being bullied and cajoled by Mildred into a union with Felix, Ann senses and resents Mildred's role as director of the drama:

> Mildred had led up to her moment of theatre, but she must be cheated of it and sent away empty. There must be no drama here, no possible foothold for the imagination ... There must be no admission of knowledge or interest, no confused looks, nothing. Again it was no and nothing.
>
> 'Yes,' said Ann. (45)

Ann is like an inverted version of the Duke in Shakespeare's Measure For Measure. The Duke tried covertly to stage-manage the other characters in the play, but found himself sucked into the drama: a kind of playing God which backfired on him. Ann studiously tries *not* to stage-manage, or to be managed herself: as Dipple says, 'no drama, no scenes' (46) - to Randall a 'devillish' role. And indeed she echoes Randall's words about destroying his 'imagination, all the bloody footholds' (47). Again, this role backfires on Ann for, because of 'a naked meaningless incapacity to take what she wanted' (48), Ann loses both Felix and Randall.

The extraordinary thing about Ann's repeated negations is that - as for the Duke's denials of his own personality, his disguises - they do not manage to seperate her from the drama at all, for she later discovers the break with Felix was not her own doing (or non-doing) at all, but was cunningly stage-managed by her daughter:

> So the act had been Miranda's ... she had had no act of her own, she had been a part of someone else's scheme, a thought, almost, in someone else's mind. And yet surely this was not right either. Had she acted, or had her act been stolen from her? ... Then she recalled how Douglas Swann had said to her that 'being good is a state of unconsciousness', and she shook her head again. (49)

It is as though form - plots, scenes, structures etc. - always exist in spite of any individual electing for formlessness. Further, just as a character is congratulating himself on having pressed the go button on his own particular plot, he often discovers that someone else was, as it were, pulling the strings, so that forms continually mask and shadow other forms. This happens for example when Randall 'captures' Lindsay from Emma. When he arrives to gloat over his defeat of Emma she casually lets it slip that *she* arranged it all, and Randall feels 'his scene was being taken from him' (50). Similarly, Hugh feels himself to be 'the acknowledged author' (51) of the whole drama, and in almost identical circumstances finds himself 'cheated of his scene' (52). In the end nobody seems to know what anybody did.

If goodness is associated with formlessness, and yet forms - usually hidden ones - proliferate in life, then where does the good man or woman stand in relation to them? The answer seems to lie in the direction of Swann's counsel. Forms are endemic and anti-good, but goodness lies not in imposing formlessness, but in somehow reining in the imagination so as to remain *unconscious* of the forms. We see the impact of an awareness of form on other characters in An Unofficial Rose: the fastidious Felix, preferring not to know what Mildred is doing on his behalf, flinching back

from 'a glimpse of the machinery' (53); Mildred herself, having just violently denounced Hugh's plan to sell the Tintoretto to fund Randall's going off with Lindsay as simply and clearly an immoral act, being 'stirred up and confused' (54) by the sudden awareness that her own interests are involved.

In a story tense with rumours of material expectations the Tintoretto painting stands out as something special. More than a possession, it seems to hover over the scheming protagonists like an incorruptible witness, a 'poised angel' (55), and it seems to have restorative properties, as when Hugh is described as going to it 'as to a shrine for refreshment' (56). Specified as 'a small sun' (57) in the 'cavern' (58) in which Hugh lives, it is surely present as a rival source of illumination to that other sun, 'the self, the old unregenerate psyche, that great source of energy and warmth' (59), itself a mimic of the great sun which lies beyond the cavern mouth. In The Fire and the Sun Murdoch has this to say about the spiritual potential of good art:

> Good art, thought of as symbolic force rather than statement, provides a stirring image of a pure transcendent value, a steady visible enduring higher good, and perhaps provides for many people, in an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, their clearest *experience* of something grasped as seperate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and unpossessively in the attention ... Beauty is, as Plato says, visibly transcendent; hence indeed the metaphor of vision is indispensable in discussions of aesthetics and morality ... Good art ... provides work for the spirit. (60)

Mildred is morally paralysed once she allows her own interests to surface, and Ann is physically paralysed when she permits her interests to be submerged. It is as though, once the characters become aware of form or the possibility of it, they lose their way; as though 'a steady visible enduring higher good' gets extinguished, and, as it were, a smaller sun, the self, or, just as bad, that black vacuum which remains when the self has withdrawn, is substituted in its place.

I think it is being suggested to us, in both An Unofficial Rose and The Fire and the Sun, that the pursuit of naked goodness, represented by the true sun, is a task too difficult for humans. Instead, or at least at first, one ought to try flexing one's spiritual muscles on a more realistic task - on the appreciation of good art - in this case on the 'smaller sun' of the Tintoretto. Or, to mix the metaphor, before attempting the steep ascent of the cave, it is wise to get in a little practice first on the nursery slopes of art. In any case there seems to be an urgent need for humans to receive

some kind of guidance, some focus for the attention, which is located outside the self.

It should be noted, however, that once the sexual dominoes get underway, the Tintoretto is simply reduced to another cypher in the game and is quickly sold off*. Good art may indeed exercise the spiritual muscles, but the effect is usually transient and easily outweighed by the resilient strength of the self.

The authority of good art is also momentarily felt by Dora in The Bell, when she visits the pictures in the National Gallery:

> She marvelled, with a kind of gratitude, that they were all still here, and her heart was filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour ... Here was something which her consciousness could not wretchedly devour, and by making it part of her fantasy make it worthless ... the pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood. (61)

Good art here is a health-giving injection to reverse the miserable conviction that there is nothing real outside the self. The unchecked self is rapacious and reductive, tending to swallow the outside world and digest it as a consoling but ultimately unsatisfying fantasy. In registering the alternative qualities of generosity and expansiveness, the pictures speak of the freshness of a world outside the self. Again though, the effect is temporary, for once returned to the main action of the story, Dora regains her 'trance-like solipsism'.

Peter Wolfe relates this solipsism to Lewis Caroll's mirror image. The self, rather than examine the real world, is usually happy enough to contemplate its own image and call that real. Wolfe says of this de-realisation:

> People only exhaust life (their own) when they decline to pass through the image of the self into the world of material objects and of other minds. (61)

This has echoes in the experience of Dora, for the relief occasioned by her visit to the gallery follows on from her discontent after seeing the reflections in the lake and 'the odd feeling that all this was inside her head' (62). She actually tries 'breaking into this scene' by throwing a lipstick at it, but fails to disturb the images. It is as though the self normally contemplates mirrors, but from time to time is nauseated by the suspected artificiality of what it sees there - in this sense it is ironic that Dora throws a lipstick, which is itself a kind of symbol of

artificiality. At these times good art can operate as, so to speak, a window on the real world beyond the mirror.

This also matches the experience of Harriet in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, whose seemingly generous impulse to embrace her rival is analysed in the book as a rapacious, self-centred wish to 'swallow Emily whole' (63). This fitful condition of frightened greedy absorption into which Harriet drifts whenever she starts to think about her own interests, is contrasted with the amazed curiosity which she feels before the picture of Giorgione's 'Saint Anthony and Saint George' in the National Gallery. I quote a longish passage here because I think it shows Harriet's imagination expanding to freshly explore a familiar scene - as she describes it, like 'being let out into a huge space and not being myself any more' (64). Imagination is a force of expansion, and is opposed to fantasy, a force of reduction. The passage also demonstrates Murdoch's own parallel power to stimulate the imagination of the reader, who does not even have the benefit of the image before him, this latter case being, I think, a clear example of how good prose can have the same function as good pictorial art in opening a window on the world:

> There was a tree in the middle background which she had never properly attended to before. Of course she had seen it, since she had often looked at the picture, but she had never before felt its significance, though what that significance was she could not say. There it was in the middle of clarity, in the middle of bright darkness, in the middle of limpid sultry yellow air, in the middle of nowhere at all with distant clouds creeping by behind it, linking the two saints yet also separating them and also being itself and nothing to do with them at all, a ridiculously frail poetical vibrating motionless tree which was also a special particular tree on a special particular evening when the two saints happened (how odd) to be doing their respective things (ignoring each other) in a sort of murky yet brilliant glade (what on earth however was going on in the foreground?) beside a luscious glistening pool out of which two small and somehow domesticated demons were cautiously emerging for the benefit of Saint Anthony, while behind them Saint George, with a helmet like a pearl, was bullying an equally domesticated and inoffensive little dragon. (65)

Notice the amount of questions and sheer surprise thrown up by Harriet's examination of the picture, so different to the world-weary certainty which accompanies Blaise's interpretations of his client's dreams. Significantly, Blaise does not share his wife's interest in the gallery pictures.

That Dora and Harriet scrutinising the pictures is an exercise in loving might seem an odd idea, but it makes sense when taken in conjunction with the experience of Ann, and with Murdoch's own non-fictional pronouncements on love. Ann got into acute difficulties when she lost the unconscious

middle ground between form and formlessness. Notice that Harriet apprehends the tree in the picture as oscillating between a 'poetical' and a 'particular' condition. The 'poetical' condition presumably refers to the tree as part of the structure of the painting - its mythological or legendary or aesthetic justification for being there. But the 'particular' condition must refer to its unique status as an individual tree 'just happening' to be present in this frame. Thus the tree is a formal tree and a formless tree, or rather, 'in the middle of nowhere at all', it seems to hold the middle ground between form and formlessness. In The Sovereignty of Good Murdoch says:

> Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real ... What stuns us ... is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all things is the mind of man. (66)

The paintings, in seeming to guarantee a real world independent of the self, give a joyful impulse to Dora which she equates with love. And Harriet's experience takes this notion further, beyond the form versus formlessness debate, into the realms of 'unutterable particularity'. Murdoch has consistently maintained this as a definition of love and we can trace it right back to her first novel, Under the Net, in the tension which exists between Jake and Hugo. Jake hates what he calls the 'contingent' parts of London - the bits that exist without any reason or plan or purpose that he can see. This has wider implications than geography, for he declares: 'I hate contingency. I want everything in my life to have sufficient reason.' (67) This urge to justify-or-discard causes him to organise the people around him into a necessary pattern of relationships with himself at the centre. And in fact the 'nausea' (68) he feels in the presence of contingency allies Jake to Roquentin in Sartre's Nausea, who also experiences a 'swooning abundance' (69) of things.

In contrast Hugo feels no anxiety in the face of the contingent, nor any urge to organise into patterns, but rather he rejoices in the diversity of things: 'God is detail' (70), he says of his resolve to become a watchmaker. Murdoch, through Jake's eyes, brilliantly sums up Hugo's particular quality of attention to the world in a botanical metaphor:

> I felt like a man who, having vaguely thought that flowers are all much the same, goes for a walk with a botanist. Only this simile doesn't fit Hugo either, for a botanist not only notices details but classifies. Hugo only noticed details. He never classified. It was as if his vision were sharpened to the point where even classification was impossible, for each thing was seen as absolutely unique. (71)

Nausea at the contingent is a marked feature of many of Murdoch's characters. Barney Drumm expresses it in The Red and the Green when he describes the rocks in Dublin Harbour. He fears their randomness, their irregularity. For him they are 'senseless ... like the greaty weighty stupid world which had rolled off the lap of God' (72).

Charles in The Sea, The Sea is repeatedly thwarted by the rocks and the sea which he describes several times as 'devoid of reason' (73). Similarly, Theo in The Nice and the Good is appalled by the multiplicity and randomness of the stones on the beach:

> The intention of God could reach only a little way through the opacity of matter, and where it failed to penetrate there was just jumble and desolation. (74)

In all these complaints there is a strong sense that an organising principle, usually God, has partially or wholly withdrawn from the scene, and that the resulting disorder is intolerable. Different characters in fact deal with the perceived disorder in different ways. Theo is almost paralysed by the multiplicity of the stones; Ann, we saw, tending to the formless, found herself beseiged by forms, and eventually lost the precious unconscious middle ground between. Other characters, consciously or otherwise, mobilise their minds into an attack on contingency by marshalling it into forms, such as Jake or Hilary Burde or Michael Meade or Barney - who tidies and dramatises his dull and messy personal history into a book of consoling Memoirs (75). The 'good' characters tend to tread a narrow line between form and the formless, such as Hugo, who we saw rejoicing in 'unutterable particularity', or James Arrowby, who declares that 'stories are false' (76), or the twins in The Nice and the Good, who are not constantly hunting for meaning in things - they *accept* the appearance of the flying saucer where one feels the adults would have gone neurotic trying to *explain* it (77) - and, in violent contrast to Theo, regard the stones as 'a treasury of lovable individuals' (78).

But the good are a rare commodity, and even the studied form-makers, like Jake and Hilary, tend to be present only to the extent of about one per novel. What is more common are what we might call the opportunist form makers - those characters who employ or become part of a myth or story or structure for a while, and then opt out of that form, usually in order to become part of another form. In this sense we are all of us form makers, and an unstable swirling mixture of contingent articles and potential or actual formal structures is the medium in which we move.

The Bell provides a number of examples of what I mean here. Byatt praises The Bell as Murdoch's 'most complete achievement' (79) (of the first seven novels), but argues that the bell itself, intended as the central unifying symbol, is not successfully incorporated. The roses and the Tintoretto in An Unofficial Rose, she says, are successful 'natural' symbols because they are worked without strain into the story. But the bell seems 'planted', 'dragged in', with the result that there is a 'contrived necessity about this book' (80).

I think this sense of awkwardness about the bell is a by-product of its being so often the focus of opportunist form-making. Paul uses the legend of the old bell to persecute Dora with; Dora uses the bell in order to 'play the witch' (81); Toby, as the engineer behind Dora's plot, becomes 'the sorcerer's apprentice' (82); and Dora and Toby use the bell together as a sort of impromptu love nest (83); Michael and James both use the bell symbolically as a subject for their ingenious and moving sermons; the new bell is paraded before the bishop in the garments of a postulant as part of a medieval ritual; Nick sabotages the bell as part of a plot of his own; the bell becomes part of a newspaper story in which all the facts get distorted in order to discredit the community; the bell is also incorporated into the brilliant internal monologue quoted earlier where, in Michael's mind, events 'chimed in so exactly' (84).

Actually, when listed in this way the bell seems so insidiously a part of the language and the action that Byatt's criticism seems unfair, and the 'contrived necessity' of the book to be more a product of the characters than the author. But the general sense of the bell being manipulated, 'dragged in', used, abused and dropped - literally, at one point, into the lake - is very strong, and emphasised in a scene with Dora:

> Attending to it, she was struck again by the marvel of its resurrection and she felt reverence for it, almost love. When she thought how she had drawn it out of the lake and lifted it into its own airy element she was amazed and suddely felt unworthy. How could the great bell have suffered her to drag it here so unceremoniously ... She should not have tampered with it. (85)

In attending to it and so recognising it for the first time as a real object in the world, Dora becomes ashamed of the way she has been using it for her own purposes. When Dora rings the great bell it is as though it is being allowed to speak for itself, instead of being reduced to a prop in other people's plays. This experience is very like what Dora underwent with the pictures in the gallery - an injection of reality, an exercise in loving. It also parallels the much slower loving exercise which the other

characters undergo - some of them, like Paul, fail to undergo it at all - as they reluctantly discard the handy labels, 'poor fish', 'bitch', 'pansy' (86) and so on, they have been using to categorise people with, and try to see the individual beneath.

With Ann Peronett, we saw how difficult it is to withstand the siege of forms and to retain that unconscious state synonymous with goodness. Similarly, with Michael Meade, despite his sincere intention to relinquish power, he kept other characters trapped in a pattern which he secretly held in his mind. They are, to use the cave and sun myth, two characters on that upward slope, finding it very difficult to keep their footing.

One of the hazards of the upward slope is the alienation experienced by the pilgrims. Murdoch often addresses the subject of alienation, for instance early novels such as The Flight from the Enchanter and The Time of the Angels include alien or refugee figures, and Conradi points out how Murdoch's interest in these outsider figures seems to derive from her own background as an only child, an Irish 'exile', and especially from the work she did for UNRRA (87). These outsider figures tend either to be persecuted and devoured by the dominant culture into which they hoped to be assimilated, for example Nina the dressmaker in The Flight from the Enchanter, or they react agaist their persecution and become devourers themselves, such as the Lusiewicz brothers in the same novel. There seems to be no happy medium for these alien characters, their presence seems to generate an entirely predatory atmosphere. However, this particular form of alienation is largely unconnected with the quest for goodness, has already been well covered by critics* and is not directly within the scope of this thesis.

The kind of alienation discussed here, and which I think is more evident in the later novels, is of a non- or at least less obviously predatory kind. It seems to take its meaning less from a them-versus-us scenario, strongly present in the earlier novels, and more from a sense of the fire in the cave being a centre of security, warmth and life, with the slope beyond it more than ever associated with the reverse qualities of insecurity, coldness and anti-life.

These beyond-the-fire components of alienation connect directly with the quest for goodness. With only a nagging conscience for company, the lonely frightened pilgrim is very tempted to 'turn away and flee' (88) back to the peopled comfort of the camp fire. We see some of these components manifest thmselves in the experiences of slope-climbing characters in the novels we have just looked at. Michael experiences insecurity when he finds the support of the spiritual authority of the Abbess mysteriously

withdrawn once he is installed at Imber, the circumtances suggesting that Michael's isolation is a challenge to his own thesis that 'the good man is without power' (89). Similarly, Ann, attempting to keep out of the drama, finds herself exposed, in the spotlight, forced by the others to adopt a Penelope-like role, surrounded by hostile gossips and pressed by suitors while she attempts to keep faith with the wandering Odysseus figure of Randall.

Dipple examines Murdoch's stringent definition of good and hence its infinite unattainability (90). Taking individual characters she relates them on a hierarchy of goodness which is extremely rarified in its upper regions and topped by only one actual 'saint' (91), Brendan's mother in Henry and Cato, who never actually makes an appearance in the book. The level below Brendan's mother contains only three sub-saintly characters taken from the first nineteen novels. The sub-saintly manage to keep their egos under control, but all below are more or less hopelessly riddled with unbridled egotism. When Dipple comes to novel number twenty she declares it a 'special case' (92), saturated with the sub-saintly:

> Here in Nuns and Soldiers we have not merely one character of the lonely good, usually the maximum endowment for a novel, but several who are on the road: Anne, Guy, the Count, perhaps Manfred, perhaps Gerald Pavitt, perhaps even the hidden character Balintoy. (93)

It is true that Murdoch's definition of good is a stringent one and that the characters she draws almost invariably fall hopelesly short of it. The true pilgrimage is a bleak one, becoming bleaker, and its end point some unimaginable - in fact imageless - vanishing point. In The Fire and the Sun she expresses it thus:

> Escape from the Cave and approach to the Good is a progressive discarding of relative false goods, of hypotheses, images, and shadows, eventually seen as such ... St. John of the Cross says that God is the abyss of faith into which we fall when we have discarded all images of him. (94)

However, despite this stringency, I do not agree with Dipple that the 'true centre' (95) of the novels is concerned with the sun end of the pilgrimage, or that the bleak fastidiousness of Murdoch's definition of goodness is a general impression which the reader gets from the fiction.

Conradi picks up on the way Dipple seems to exaggerate Murdoch's fastidiousness when he describes her tendency to act like a 'moral terrorist conducting a series of ethical unmaskings and denunciations on the characters', the result being, he says, that Dipple sometimes 'shows a Calvinism wholly at odds with Iris Murdoch's own generosity' (96). James

Tayper-Pace's fundamentalism in The Bell may render his view of the world inadequate, and Tim Reede in Nuns and Soldiers may be steeped in artistic and moral mediocrity, but that does not result in Murdoch short-changing them as individuals in her writing: she gives them detail and scope enough so that we do not feel they are merely designed to enact her judgements; we feel that they are sufficiently inspired with life to evade her control. 'You mustn't just write them off' (79), says Arnold Baffin, in The Black Prince, of the people of whom Bradley does not approve, and this is a principle which Murdoch follows in her fiction, the 'kindly breath of tolerance' (98) which she sees in Shakespeare*.

I think Dipple's 'Calvinism' has caused her to overlook Murdoch's career-long interest in life as it is lived by the fire, and is also responsible for Dipple, unused to seeing a whole *party* of pilgrims on the steep slope, having to pronounce Nuns and Soldiers a 'special case'.

Speaking in particular of Nuns and Soldiers, Dipple says:

> In fact the three rejected elements ... God, philosophy (especially Wittgenstein) and at-homeness in the world - all appear as powerful, even overwhelming forces which, like the bourgeoise content, distract attention from the true centre. (99)

Dipple's statement here is that the sophisticated reader must not be either seduced or put off by the highbrow discussions on philosophy (alarmingly, the very first word of Nuns and Soldiers is 'Wittgenstein') or the nature of God which take place in this and other novels, and he or she must similarly avoid being sidetracked by the moneyed, well-connected world of Ebury Street, variations of which form the principal landscape of many Murdoch novels. Instead the reader must remain alert for less sensational developments in the story, for those less vivid characters attempting to sneak out of the cave while we are not looking. These and only these characters, Dipple seems to suggest, are the 'true' focus of Murdoch's attention.

I think Dipple is half right here. The religious and non-Platonic philosophical elements are, I agree, often thrown in as toys for the reader to play with, or perhaps as provocations to those critics who decry her as a 'philosophical novelist'. However, I think the notion of 'at-homeness in the world', and even the 'bourgeoise content' are far from being 'rejected' elements of Nuns and Soldiers, or of the other novels. The Nice and the Good draws a distinction between characters of the 'nice', intelligent hedonists such as the Grays, and characters of the 'good', such as Uncle Theo, who have enough clear vision to appreciate the annihilating prospect

of a totally selfless love, that is, of absolute good. But though Murdoch treats her 'nice' characters with irony, she by no means, to use Arnold Baffin's phrase, 'writes them off'. They are shown to make a valuable contribution, for their niceness provides a little haven in which other characters may thrive. In the case of Mary Clothier:

> The golden and life-giving egoism and rich self-satisfaction of Kate and her husband inspired in Mary a certain hedonism which, puny as it was by comparison, was for her a saving grace. (100)

Mary's ego, maimed by the accidental death of her husband, is a little helped by the healing rays of the Grays, and their fleshy benevolent solipsism, for which the circle, the 'O' of Octavian, plumpness and 'roundness' (101), figures as a kind of logo in the book, and extends to the many other camp-followers, including Theo himself. It is as though, in order to survive at all, characters aspiring towards the good must have their 'nice' counterparts upon which they live as parasites.

Conradi detects this relationship when he describes The Nice and the Good as marking 'a new phase of ironic benevolence about the urgencies of the ego' (102), and also when he relates Octavian to Stiva Oblonsky in Tolstoy's Anna Karenina: 'In an imperfect world the imperfect Stiva can be an agent of light' (103). It is interesting too to note the language used to describe these centres of benevolence. Stiva is an 'agent of light', and Murdoch describes the effect of Kate Gray's entry into a room as follows:

> ... and at once as if struck by some piercing stellar ray the scene dissolved into atoms and reassembled itself round Kate as centre. (104)

It is as though, for the first time, their status as fires-in-the-cave or small suns, is not being used pejoratively, but in order to commend them to us. I feel Murdoch is saying that the false sun, the fire in the cave, is the one which most often appears in our skies, and should not be sneered at, provided its limitations are appreciated and it is not worshipped to the exclusion of the true sun.

Because Octavian and Oblonsky are accomplished hedonists, socially and financially secure, this can show itself in a certain generosity of thought and feeling (as well as of money), what can amount almost to an instinct for unselfishness. In A Word Child, this is revealed in the contrast between the prowling wolf-like outsider figure of Hilary with his parasitic existence tolerated on the fringes of the happy, secure Impiatt encampment. In The Black Prince it emerges in Rachel's comment on her husband's smugness: 'Arnold is so self-satisfied that he's really generous, it's real virtue' (105).

In fact I think it is possible to glimpse the same relationship, the 'nice' creating little oases for other characters, including the 'good' ones, in earlier novels such as An Unofficial Rose where, if Randall being tied to Ann can be thought of as an accident of finance, which is certainly a possible construction, then wealthy Hugh selling the Tintoretto to provide the necessary funds may actually be seen as Ann's blessed opportunity to, in the nautical sense, 'cut the painter' (106): her necessary and good act.

In the later novel, Nuns and Soldiers, I think that the plethora of pilgrims Dipple claims to see on the upward slope is really a kind of illusion. Indeed she sees a host of characters who have, intentionally or otherwise, become distanced from the fire. But to stray from the fire is *not* the same thing as to approach the sun. Anne Cavidge, I agree, is a 'character of the lonely good' (DIP 318), but the Count is not: by comparison he is merely a lonely character. The Count is an outsider, unable to put down the burden of his Polish history. Murdoch, in early novels, typically uses such alien figures as indicators of the various kinds of xenophobia operating in English society: they crush or become crushed, operating as figures of retribution, or as scapegoats. In fact the sense of these characters being *used* by Murdoch to make a point is very strong.

In Nuns and Soldiers the effect is more complex for the Count is shown lurking on the fringes of Ebury Street, an encampment he can neither properly join nor decently leave. He is stuck there, half in and half out of an organic unity whose tentacles are so numerous - the book has a huge cast-list many of whose members, often interconnected by family or other bonds, are realised in detail - that they seem to rule out the kind of use/abuse of characters by the author which occurs in the early novels. It is as though Murdoch is keen to work up the tension between organising *forms* operating in the novel - in this case the cave myth, but also Gertrude's role as a Penelope figure (108) - and the effectively disorganising *detail* being put in. 'Spot the shape', Murdoch seems to be saying at one moment and then, 'There is no shape', she says in the next.

This tension is paralleled by a similar conflict between isolation and connectedness. On the one hand there is the Count listening to the shipping forecast, imagining 'solitary wireless operators on tossing ships' (109), a world of lonely beleaguered souls, and on the other hand there is the warmth of the Ebury St. fireside, where the Count hmself goes for consolation, and where another outsider, Tim, comes to raid the well-stocked fridge. By the end of the book orphan Tim, married to Gertrude, has come in from he cold and it is the turn of the others to raid the fridge.

It is important to grasp that almost the whole book is devoted to this migration in from the cold, this craving for at-homeness. Probably the only character wilfully engaged in a movement *out* into the cold which is explicitly connected with a quest for goodness is Anne giving up her convent life - pointedly described as being 'inside' (110) - to go out into the world as 'the spy of a non-existent God' (111). All the other characters crave the warmth and 'the faith that goes with belonging' (112), which is the prized achievement celebrated by Shakespeare in Twelfth Night in the figure of Sir Toby. Anne, by contrast, truly attempts to embrace the spirit of her defeated, powerless Christ, the son of a non-existent God, who reminds her 'that birds have nests and foxes have holes but I have no home' (113). Only a rare few of Murdoch's characters - Brendan Craddock in Henry and Cato is another - ever properly manage to adopt this no-fixed-abode mode of existence which is the way out of the cave; all others on the upward slope are in a state of flux, pulled at alternately by the fire and the sun. I will pursue the subject of Murdoch's no-fixed-aboders in the next chapter.

Unfortunately, what often drives aspirants on is spiritual pride. Trilling wrote about a tradition in English fiction that makes snobbery (pride of place without pride of function) 'the great joke' (114) at the centre of, for example, the novels of Jane Austen or Dickens. Conradi sees spiritual pride as a retelling by Murdoch of this 'great joke'. Spiritual pride is certainly a factor in The Bell, where Dora revolts against the Imber community who piously set themselves up as 'the spiritual ruling class' (115), whose headpiece is Michael, himself unable to relinquish the seductive priestly role. And spiritual pride is again the motive in Henry and Cato, where priest Cato cannot give up the conviction that he and only he can save the boy, Beautiful Joe; and Henry seizes on the dissolution of Laxlinden Hall, the family home, as an opportunity to 'travel light and live the stripped life' (116) - this 'progressive discarding' (117) being a parody of the real stripping down which Brendan undertakes.

Cato's lesson must be that he has no monopoly on salvation, and Henry must recognise that his real motive for dissolving the Hall was as an act of revenge against his mother who neglected him in childhood. To live the 'stripped life' might have been a worthy ambition in a better man, he later admits, but in him it was a case of 'mistaking my moral level' (118). Michael perhaps expresses the complexity of such lessons most clearly. Reflecting on the emotional muddle with Toby:

> The trouble was, as Michael now saw, that he had performed the action which belonged by right to a better person; and yet too,

> by an austere paradox, a better person would not have been in the situation that required that action ... What he had failed to do was accurately to estimate his own resources, his own spiritual level ... One must perform the lower act which one can manage and sustain: not the higher act which one bungles. (119)

In fact the two sermons in the book figure this very conflict, perhaps never resolved, between James's 'Be ye therefore perfect' (120) and Michael's more tolerant 'wisdom of the serpent' (121): Be ye therefore slightly improved. The book shows the first edict to be impossible, and yet morality seems an unworkable concept without it; the second seems more likely, and yet veers dangerously close to the broad road to perdition. In The Sovereignty of Good Murdoch suggests that the idea of love arises necessarily in the attempt to mediate between best and second-best (122).

Whichever edict is the chosen one a clear grasp of the debate seems essential if, on contemplating the ascent out of the cave, one is to avoid the kind of destructive accidents which happen to so many of Murdoch's aspirants: what Conradi calls a 'too sudden decentring' (123). 'Decentring' is the recognition of a world where ones own ego is absent, the organising centre then being diffused democratically between all the other individuals in it. Some Murdoch characters experience sudden very brief decentring experiences, such as the ego-less world Effingham Cooper glimpses in the bog in The Unicorn (124). For Effingham this was a serene episode, but depending on the circumstances the experience can be a black one too. Morgan in A Fairly Honourable Defeat undergoes both bliss and terror in rapid succession: 'Mad with joy' at the flowers, but then struck down by 'the loathsomeness at the centre of it all' (125).

More drawn out decentring experiences occur elsewhere, such as in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, where Harriet's attempt to give up her matronly role results in a vacuum which she cannot occupy. Brendan is extensively decentred, but his temperament is suited and his induction has taken years of patience and discipline, and - perhaps most importantly of all - he has the support of his Jesuit community. Cato and Henry, weaker men, want to get there in a rush, a do-or-die assault on the summit of goodness: as Brendan points out, they see goodness as a 'once-and-for-all pill that you take' (126). Cato's retreat into himself results in his incarceration and terrorisation in a dark, bare cellar, which is a miserable parody of the Platonic cave he grandly imagined himself to be returning to. Similarly, Henry, budgeting for a 'stripped life', finds himself by the end of the book abducted back into a life of material wealth and happiness by Colette.

This do-or-die urge, which is a phenomenon mainly associated with Murdoch's male characters, is perhaps what Johnson is monitoring when she brings to Murdoch's fiction the ideas of the French feminist writer, Luce Irigaray. Irigaray is a modern-day exponent of a line of thought going back to Freud, who pointed out that the Cave could be seen as 'a female place, a womb-shaped enclosure, a house of earth, secret and often sacred' (127). This feminine aspect of the Cave, Irigaray claims, has been obscured by the dominant masculine trend of Western philosophy. Translating and paraphrasing Irigaray, Johnson puts it thus:

> The Cave stands in this masculine representation for the womb, the matrix, also the earth. It is described as a *theatrical* enclosure ... where the representations of Western thought are deployed. These images are distorted ... woman becomes man's shadow, or mirror-image ... The Cave proposes a set of oppositions, differences, discontinuities between outside and inside, high and low, daylight and earth-fire, escaped man and prisoner ... These oppositions, Irigaray goes on to say, 'always assume a *leap* from worse to better ... Vertical. Phallic?'. In this leap the possibility of negotiation, transition, moving to and fro between two realms is forgotten [and the Cave becomes] the 'forgotten vagina'. The Cave as the site of difference is negated by the single principle of the divine paternal logos envisaged in the parable as the Sun. (128).

I think it is important to point out that the original myth as described in the Republic assumes no such *'leap'* from worse to better. The actual ascent, as I have tried to stress, is a very slow, dynamic, difficult one, composed almost entirely of 'negotiation' (squabbles with the guide) and 'transition' (gradual habituation to the light). The 'oppositions' exist, of course, but it is the 'to and fro' which is stressed, not the extremes. Furthermore, it is very hard to see how a sexual interpretation, let alone a sexist one, could be put upon Plato's words. The pilgrim and the guide are figured to be men, in that they are denoted as 'he', but their sexuality is otherwise absent, and in any case Plato assumes no monopoly to men as automatic holders of superior vision (129).

Where Murdoch figures in this, of course, is another matter. Johnson points to The Sea, The Sea as Murdoch's 'most sustained fictional reworking of the parable of the Cave' (130). Charles Arrowby, in that book, describes his self-exploration as a journey through 'a dark cavern' with iluminated shafts coming either from a daylight source or from 'the centre of the earth' (131). What happens is that Charles fails to discriminate between the different sources and opts for a guiding light which leads, not to the sun, but down deeper inside himself. As Johnson says, 'the author plays ironically with Charles's version of the parable' (132). It is true that

Charles's misconception creates opportunities for great irony: his idea of freedom, for example, involves literally imprisoning Hartley at Shruff End (133). However, I dispute that Charles's misconception, carefully distanced as it is from the authorial voice, actually amounts to a 'reworking of the parable' by Murdoch. Charles, more or less unconsciously, is using the same parable with the *same values* attached to its components and overall message. It is just that Charles's perceptions aren't up to discriminating between outward and inward-leading lights. This failure of vision is common to many Murdoch characters, for example Cato undergoes an explicitly Platonic ascesis when he speaks of entering

> a white joy, as if he had not only emerged from the cave, but was looking at the Sun and finding that it was easy to look at. (134).

Cato's vision sounds rather optimistic compared to the searing light thrown out in the original myth and leads us to suspect that Cato is mistaking the fire for the sun. And again, a more subtle confusion occurs in An Unofficial Rose where the 'small sun' (135) of the Tintoretto, shedding the modest illumination of good art, is sold to fuel the even smaller sun, the fire which is Randall's love for Lindsay.

These are clever *uses* of the myth, but to call them 'reworkings', in the context of the liberties which Irigaray takes with that myth, is putting the case far too strongly. Looked at more closely, Johnson's claim rests upon the slender evidence of a scene at the end of The Nice and the Good, where the twins see a flying saucer which glows 'with a light which seemed to *emanate from itself* and *owe nothing to the sun*' (136 - Johnson's italics). I think more evidence would be needed to demonstrate that Murdoch is actually trying to suggest a world where the 'divine paternal logos' does not shine, and in fact Johnson admits that

> Perhaps it would be too neat to suggest a parallel between Iris Murdoch's imaginative writing here and the lyrical ... attempts of Luce Irigaray ... to evoke the repressed 'feminine' in discourse. (137)

And in interview Murdoch has said that, other than encouraging women to 'join the human race' through education, she does not herself recognise a sexual divide: 'I think there's a kind of human contribution, but I don't think there's a feminine contribution'. (138)

What actually happens in Murdoch's fiction is not that the parable is 'reworked' in the Johnson sense, but that there seems to be a demarcation of roles within the cave. The men go off in search of virtues, like John Ducane pursuing justice and Theo pursuing goodness in The Nice and the

Good, or else they elevate their loves into great Holy Grail quests, like Hilary Burde or Charles Arrowby (see Chapter Two). They picture their lives as dramas, often associated with the cave pilgrimage. Meanwhile the women are expected to - and are sometimes contented to - as it were, stay behind and cook the dinner on the fire. Or rather, they are often there as consoling agencies where the men return to have their wounds licked after their adventures. This seems to be the relationship between George and Stella in The Philosopher's Pupil. Stella believes she can 'cure' George (139), and all the women in the book seem to crave him as an object to be 'saved'. George sums this relationship up in the presence of another would-be saviour, Diane:

> 'God bless women, they never write a man off. Men judge, women don't. What would we do without them? That women's world of quietness and forgiveness to which we return battle-scarred. You soothe and animate our images of ourselves.' (140)

And again, in A Word Child, the woman, Tommy, is always there hoping to abduct Hilary off into a world of domestic happiness, as is Colette in Henry and Cato.

The gap between the thinking which appoints these roles and the authorial voice is visible in the irony with which the questing heroes are treated (see Chapter One), and also, for example, in The Nice and the Good where Mary waits years for an opportunity to console Willy Kost. Willy was emotionally maimed in a POW camp, but when he eventually tells her 'the most terrible thing that ever happened to me' (141), his story, though harrowing enough in itself, is not about torture by the Nazis, but a playground accident when he was six. Willy actually reserves the concentration camp story for Theo, who only pretends to listen, knowing he cannot help. Mary is here mocked for being naive about the salvation she can dipense, but the mockery is gentle, for even the most good character in the book can do little to help Willy. Similarly, in The Philosopher's Pupil, none of the women achieve their ambition of 'saving' George, that is something he has to work out for himself; and Tommy's mission to rescue Hilary is left ambiguously incomplete. The overall message to saviours and saved alike comes ironically from the archetypal saviour, Jesus Christ, only in Murdoch's version Christ is a defeated figure whose entry into Jerusalem is not triumphant and who fails to rise again on Easter Sunday. As he says to Anne, eager for a sign: 'You must do it all yourself, you know' (142).

Additional authorial distance from the saviour-savee role demarcation is visible when one takes into account the amount of *connectedness*, balanced

by the isolation described earlier, which occurs between characters, within and across the sexes, in Murdoch's fiction. People may appoint roles for themselves and others, they may, like Bradley, imagine themselves to be discrete entities, but they are actually much nearer to being the 'nebulous bits of ectoplasm straying round in other people's lives' (143) which Bradley scorns. This 'ectoplasmic' kind of interpenetration between characters comes over very strongly in The Nice and the Good, where Murdoch provides this authorial interjection on Ducane's unconscious ability to 'entissue' Jessica's life:

> There are mysterious agencies of the human mind which, like roving gasses, travel the world, causing pain and humiliation, without their owners having any full awareness, or even any awareness at all, of the strength and the whereabouts of these exhalations. Possibly a saint might be known by the utter absence of such gaseous tentacles, but the ordinary person is naturally endowed with them. (144)

And again, using a similar metaphor, Rachel describes her relationship with her husband:

> 'A married woman has no dignity, no thoughts which really stand up separately. She's a subdivision of her husband's mind, and he can release misery into her consciousness whenever he pleases, like ink spreading into water.' (145)

Murdoch exploits the tension between the painful realism of partners behaving as seeping contaminants in each other's lives and their persistent notions of rigidly defined roles, rather as if the smoke from the fire is being wafted up to sting the eyes of those who toil up the slope.

Murdoch, as we have seen, denies a specifically 'feminine contribution' to the human race. Yet the women in her novels often seem to champion connectedness, in contrast to the male quality of opposition. 'God bless women, they never write a man off', says George; and his 'blessing', which is both patronising and ruefully admiring, would fit the mouths of many of Murdoch's male protagonists.

So does Murdoch's public denial baffle the gaze, hiding, like the smoke in the Cave, a definite feminist sympathy? I should like to take up this point in the next chapter, and indeed address the whole issue of where Murdoch's sympathies lie in the cave, whether they have been changing, and why those changes might be difficult to detect.

CHAPTER FOUR: A Changing Emphasis in *The Nice and the Good*, *Bruno's Dream* and *Henry and Cato*

> And do you not think that ... when he came out into the light, that his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able to see even one of the things that we call real? ... Then there would be need of habituation ... And at first he would most easily discern the shadows and, after that, the likeness or reflections in water ... and later, the things themselves ... And so, finally, I suppose, he would be able to look upon the sun itself and see its true nature ... the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of the good, and that when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things, of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light ... [and] the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this. (1)

In the previous chapter I discussed the significance of Elizabeth Dipple's remark that in Iris Murdoch's fiction 'the good characters live offstage' (2). In chapter 2 of Work for the Spirit, Dipple discusses these 'offstage' characters at length, typically Bledyard in The Sandcastle, Tallis in A Fairly Honourable Defeat and Brendan Craddock in Henry and Cato. In the case of the retiring Bledyard his true function, she says, in a novel dominated by its 'women's magazine theme' (ie, a love affair), can be appreciated 'only if the reader can pay attention to him and is not distracted by the conventions of form' (3); and in the case of that other in-the-winger, Brendan Craddock, Dipple gives him such a compensating dose of spotlight that someone coming fresh from her account of Henry and Cato to a first reading of the novel itself might well not recognise it as the same book. In each case Dipple marvels that so 'much authorial energy is rather puzzlingly devoted to deflecting attention from such a rare, hard-earned, disciplined knowledge of the good.' (4)

How can these sub-saintly characters loom so large in Dipple's mind and yet be overlooked by the reader?* One explanation may be that Murdoch's treatment of such characters has changed with time. With Hugo Bellfounder in Under the Net, and also with Bledyard, we do not get to see the minute-by-minute fabric of their thinking, as we do in later books, for instance with Tallis and Theo Gray, where such authorial breaches of privacy tend to reveal vulnerability. This gives Bledyard a peculiarly authoritative stature# which indeed suggests that Murdoch's early allegiance is towards these veterans of the upper slopes, with the attractive implication that she holds herself aloof from those

characters involved in the ordinary round of human love. This stature is perhaps only ever equalled again in the figure of Brendan.*

The impact of Hugo and Bledyard in these early novels has been to make Murdoch seem biased towards her near-saintly characters, and it is this bias which informs Dipple's work, with the resultant impression that Murdoch's world is divided into Hugos and also-rans. But this is not the impression a reading of the novels actually gives, certainly not from The Bell (1958) onwards. In The Bell, Murdoch's attention and tolerance is shared equally between the would-be-good man, Michael, and Dora and Toby (see previous chapter); in The Nice and the Good, Kate's particular sort of generosity is portrayed as being at least as valuable as Theo's pessimistic wisdom; and in The Sea, The Sea Murdoch seems more interested in the manically egotistical Charles's failure to recreate his relationship with Hartley than she is in James's observations about the qualities of saints. Again, as for Nuns and Soldiers in the previous chapter, the question is raised: what is the 'true centre' (5) of the novels from which Murdoch is so energetically 'deflecting attention'?

One of the temptations of the cave-and-sun myth is that a careless or indeed a wilful interpretation of it# can give a strong feeling of polarity to the quest for goodness - a tendency which Murdoch seems to invite in her use of polar titles: The Nice and the Good, The Red and the Green, The Fire and the Sun. The pilgrim is either up or down, in or out, benighted or bedazzled, and the reader or critic hungers after extremes or absolutes, such as the one expressed by Mary Clothier in The Nice and the Good: 'There is only one imperative, the imperative to love' (6), which Dipple assures us

> wrenches the book from its surface adherence to the muddle of human love and aligns it to the absolutes the novel so subtly and secretly and yet so clearly is working on. (7)

Liberating the hapless reader from this cosy 'surface adherence', Dipple, in the manner of the Platonic guide, hales him along:

> John Ducane, deceptively placed at the centre of the novel's action, does not, on examination, qualify as a character of the good - that is, a character whom the percipient reader can see as under the tight, even appalling, moral discipline which is required in Iris Murdoch's subtly worked frame. He is nice, and learns a great deal, but let us look harder ... Uncle Theo ... functions as a vital signpost. (8)

And Dipple goes on to explain the sunlit region which Theo 'signposts' us towards. Dipple is accurate in describing the hierarchy of goodness,

though the word 'hierarchy' tends to belie the dynamic and democratic aspects of the pilgrimage which in Chapters One and Three I have been at pains to stress. Also, Dipple is right to alert us to the subtle seduction we face. But the total effect, as Conradi points out (9), is rather too much as if the *sole* impression given by the novels is 'Iris Murdoch's sense of the infinite unattainablity of good' (10).

To return to the original myth for a moment, at the stage described above, the long-toiling pilgrim, having emerged from the darkness of the cave, is on the brink of the sunlit land and attempting to adjust to his new surroundings. There is a paradox involved in looking directly at the sun: the more light available, the more objects become visible, and yet too much light results in blindness. But the myth explains its own limitations, for goodness does not reside in the sun itself, but is a thing or idea (what Plato sometimes called a 'form') illuminated by the sun. Ergo, to look at the sun is to misdirect our vision. Furthermore, an absolute ought to be at least theoretically attainable, but goodness in terms of the myth is an impossible commodity. It is the 'last' and 'hardly seen' thing in the landscape, which is consistent with our expectations, but the mention of it 'giving birth in the visible world to light', is rather surprising and suggests that some of its properties are not accessible to the pilgrim at all. We are aware of electromagnetic energy from the band of it which is present as light and heat, but some of the spectrum always bypasses our senses. In the same way, Plato seems to be suggesting, the good may be thought of as emitting a spectrum of radiation, only part of which we can ever hope to glimpse.

It is unlikely that Plato meant us to apply a rigorous scientific analysis to his picturing of goodness, and he often pointed out that the myth was not intended to be taken literally*. But a point of undoubted significance is that Plato says very little about the sun or even the sunlit land, which one would suppose to be the point of the journey, and seems far more interested in describing what happens when the pilgrim returns to the darkness of the cave (the subject of my next chapter). The great paradox, what happens when the source of goodness is confronted, is hardly addressed.

Murdoch notices this absence too, and likens it to the concept of God, advanced by St John of the Cross, as 'the abyss of faith into which we fall when we have discarded all images of him.' (11) Of the experience of looking into the sun there is, in the deepest sense, *nothing to say.*

So there are two areas here: the *apparent* focus of the quest, the sun, which is highlighted by the polar nature of the title, the Cave and Sun myth, and the simplicity of the picture it presents; and the *actual*, easy-to-overlook end-point of the quest, which is what happens when the pilgrim tries to bring his new enlightenment back to the world of men, that is to say, the cave.

What Dipple conveys to the reader, to couch it in terms of the myth, is her own dazzlement, her own seduction by the sun. She is taken in by the 'signposting' towards an absolute dictum, with the consequence that she underestimates, or perhaps *disapproves* of, the energy and imagination which Murdoch expends on the 'muddlers' by the fire, whose currency is ordinary human love. Dipple, as it were, spends so long scrutinising the upper reaches of the cave that she only has time to flash her torch briefly in the faces of those on the lower slopes, whereas Murdoch's distribution of attention is far more even-handed.

But just how much of this impression is down to critical bias, and how much is down to Murdoch's perverseness or inconsistency? To be perfectly fair, Murdoch does herself acknowledge a shift in emphasis over her publishing career, and the announcement comes around the time of the publication date (1968) of The Nice and the Good - one of the books I shall write about shortly:

> I was once a kind of existentialist*, and now I am a kind of Platonist. What I am concerned about really is love. (12)

This represents a move away from freedom as the central issue, and towards the theme of 'attention' (or attending to that which is). Simone Weil first suggested this theme, where it had specifically religious connotations, but Murdoch and other women writers have more recently championed its secular use.

Daphne Hampson, for example, in an article about the accumulated impact of feminism on theology, argues that attention may be a quality characteristic of women. Our age, she says, has outgrown a conceptualisation of God which, with its emphasis on 'aseity' (being complete in 'Himself'), is an essentially masculine outlook. Such an outlook promotes intolerant conformity, and reflects an obsolete social structure. What is needed now is a concept of God which stresses continuity, equality and human connectedness, rather than a sterile self-sufficiency. And Hampson finds this concept embodied in modern feminist ethos, which advocates multiplicity, variety and mutuality:

> 'thus saith the Lord' is a social product of a bygone age, [and] it is to a multilayered attentiveness that we must turn as we

> seek to discern the signs of God in the interstices of the world in which we live. (13)

Attention, which, as explained in Chapter One, is almost synonymous with love in Murdoch's vocabulary, is the inroad to these qualities.

Speaking of Martha Nussbaum and Murdoch, Hampson suggests:

> These thinkers may be doing no more than to express in conceptual language a practice which, for generations, has been innate in women, or induced in them through social circumstances. (14)

Whatever the underlying motivation, this shift of interest away from what Theo calls the 'blank demand' (15) of absolute good and towards the ordinary realm where goodness wears a human face is what Murdoch acknowledges when she says in 1968 that her concern 'really is love'. At the same time Murdoch is aware of the precedents she has set and self-consciously plays upon critical expectations so that the novels become teasing puzzles as to which region of the cave her sympathies currently lie in and how far she can mislead her readers.

The three novels upon which I have based this chapter - The Nice and the Good (1968), Bruno's Dream (1969) and Henry and Cato (1976) - seem to make much of this topographical cave-play by drawing attention to features such as boundaries and surfaces, and to possible movements across those boundaries. As reported earlier (see Chapter One), movement within the cave is often illusory - the louder it is trumpeted, the more illusory it turns out to be - and in fact in all these three novels the only true movement which takes place is ultimately seen to be in the direction of death and silence.

If one consequence of this new direction for Murdoch is a degree of undermining of the stature of some of her near-saintly characters down her publishing career, then it seems to be paralleled, from The Nice and the Good onwards, by the rise of a new brand of character which I shall call the nearly-nameless 'imps' (15a).

The Nice and the Good is set in two worlds, the quiet innocence of rural Dorset and the tenser, darker world of London. They are worlds distinct from each other, and yet their boundaries are forever blurring. At Trescombe House, the Gray's Dorset home, the land is being invaded by the sea as the twins bring home large quantities of stones, shells and sand from the beach, and the man-made outlines of the old graveyard are being remorselesly fudged by the activities of nature. The City too, in

some startling passages, appears as a dot-to-dot picture which someone could not be bothered to finish:

> The lazy sinister summer evening thickened with dust and petrol fumes and the weariness of homeward-turning human beings drifted over Notting Hill like poison gas. The perpetual din of the traffic diffused itself in the dense light, distorting the facades of houses and the faces of men. The whole district vibrated, jerked and shifted slightly, as if something else and very nasty were trying, through faults and knots and little crazy corners where lines just failed to meet, to make its way into the ordinary world. (16)

And

> There is a pointlessness of summer London more awful than anything which fogs or early afternoon twilights are able to evoke, a summer mood of yawning and glazing eyes and little nightmare-ridden sleeps in bored and desperate rooms. With this ennui, evil comes creeping through the city, the evil of indifference and sleepiness and lack of care. At such a time the long-fought temptation is wearily yielded to, and the long-dreamt-of crime is with shoulder-shrugging casualness committed at last. (17)

This 'evil' is not the influence of some Satanic realm lurking behind the facade and scheming to corrupt, as Ducane's early investigations in the novel seem to suggest, but simply, as he later realises, an everyday manifestation of the ordinary failings of ordinary men and women*. The feeling is not of positive, organised evil, but of a kind of creeping sickness brought on by inattention. The hard lines of the world begin to dissolve and a lapse of vigilance permits the irruption of an ever-present disease. The poisonous mood of indifference is present in the 'tired summer evening quarrel' (18) which precedes the accidental death of Mary's husband, Alistair, and it strongly alludes to the city of Eliot's 'Prufrock' collection, with its yellow fog-impregnated 'Streets that follow like a tedious argument/ Of insidious intent'. (19) For Eliot's haunted persona, the effect of the night is to 'Dissolve the floors of memory/ And all its clear relations,/ Its divisions and precisions' (20), as though the ordered daylight world is a precarious fiction which the fitfully-dozing town is unable to sustain. For Eliot such 'dissolution' is clearly recognised as both a creative interface and as a sort of estuary through which the often nightmarish ebb and flow of the past into present consciousness takes place, and such incursions are common in Murdoch's fiction too.

In fact, in a novel which appears to be fitted out wall-to-wall with surfaces and boundaries - for example the sexual boundary Theo dare not overstep, which is symbolised by the scene in which he carefully covers

the slumbering Pierce's back in a design of stones (21) - it is part of Murdoch's achievement that she manages also to infiltrate it with so many fluid metaphors: the 'poison gas' mentioned above; Jessica's apprehension of Ducane as one of the 'mysterious agencies of the human mind which, like roving gases, travel the world causing pain and mutilation' (22); and of course, Ducane's experience in the sea-cave, which refluxes his entire moral outlook*.

The connection with Eliot is worth pursuing further, for some aspects of The Nice and the Good echo Four Quartets. The novel has time as one of its themes - can and should Mary and Paula shake off the influence of the past? The poem shares this theme, as well as a common vocabulary of attention:

> There are three conditions which often look alike
> Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
> Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
> From self and from things and from persons; and, growing
> between them, indifference
> Which resembles the others as death resembles life,
> Being between two lives - unflowering, between
> The live and the dead nettle. (23)

Here I take the flanking conditions to be the two poles between which the Platonic pilgrim moves: the self and the other (detachment from self). To move towards the other is the preferred direction since that direction reveals more of what is real, what is good. However, when Eliot calls the third condition 'indifference' he is making an important link between its two neighbours. Indifference is inattention or lack of interest, whereas attachment and detachment, whatever else may divide them, are both at least identified as forms of interest and attention. It is just that attachment to self involves a much narrower range of interest than attachment to other. Wherever there is indifference, a failure of attention, then a gap, a 'between' ground, opens up - as Murdoch puts it, the 'faults and knots and little crazy corners' through which 'the evil of indifference' comes seeping in.

In The Nice and the Good the allusion to Eliot and the three conditions is achieved (perhaps accidentally) when Mary brings the flowering nettles ('dead' nettles) to Willy Kost (24), who cannot distinguish them from stinging ('live' nettles) - as Eliot points out, one problem is that the conditions 'often look alike'.

The allusion suggests we are being set a puzzle: exactly what is the quality of Mary's attachments at any given moment: self, or other-centred. We come to suspect the purity of her love for Willy when we

learn that (rather like Harriet in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine) she 'depended ... on a conception of her existence as justified by her talent for serving people' (25). Obviously there is a sense in which her love for Willy is self-serving: if she can coax the riddle of Dachau out of her reluctant lover then, looking at the matter cynically, she can go on feeling good about herself. What the novel asks is whether this impurity means Mary's kind of love is 'no good'?

Theo, operating as Dipple's 'signpost', disapproves of Mary's kind of love, lumping it together with 'muffins for tea' and Willy's ongoing study of Propertius as no more than tempting distractions - 'boltholes', he calls them, a term which suggests a cosy and cowardly retreat into the cave. The serious business of life should be the struggle to find a way out to 'the other side' of love (26). The discussion eventually centres on Willy's study of Propertius, with Theo bullying, 'What are you *really* after?' and Willy answering:

> 'It expresses my love for Propertius and my love for Latin. Love needs to be expressed, it needs to do work. This may be something which cannot be stated in your devilish metaphysics without being falsified, but it is ... an indubitable good ...'
>
> 'Permit me to correct your description, my dear Willy. The object of love here is yourself, this is the value which you attempt with Latin and with Propertius to exalt and defend.'
>
> 'That is possible,' said Willy. 'But I don't see why one should necessarily know. You are a great one for not knowing things. Let's not know that, shall we?' (27)

This is a recurrent Murdochian question. Is an activity still essentially 'good', is it at least still worth doing, even though the person performing it has impure motives? Theo says no. Willy, however, while conceding the inexorable logic, concludes with a 'let's not know', an altogether more human solution to the problem.

Willy, with his shaky knowledge of botany and his mediocre thesis on Propertius, is imperfect, much as Theo, who couldn't cope with the deprivations of Tibetan monastery life, is imperfect. The difference between them is perhaps no more than in the degree of acceptance they can offer to their imperfections. We can see this in the matter of touching. Both men have strong physical desires. Theo's state of not-quite-touching the beloved is contrasted with Ducane and Kate, who, with their hedonistic assumption of 'all fun and no pain' (28), do rather too much touching. Willy, on the other hand, seems to get the touching balance about right: 'There should be few that you touch, and those the dearest ones' (29), he explains to Jessica. The object of Willy's love, Barabara, is out of bounds to him - just as Pierce is out of bounds to

Theo. Theo remains in a perpetual state of thwarted sexual tension. But Willy, despite his own strictures, manages to do some opportunist touching with Jessica: a one-off sexual encounter which has the effect of releasing Jessica from her jealous obsession with Ducane.

Unlike Theo, Willy, in his own words, permits his love to 'be expressed' and to 'do work', and the general reduction in tension is the proof of the wisdom supplied by this 'little nameless imp, or an imp called Willy maybe, who is quite momentary and has no real self at all' (30).

Again, in the matter of stones, Theo exhibits a neurotic alarm at the contingent 'jumble' of beach pebbles (31), and the balancing of stones on the back of the sleeping Pierce - significantly, he has to form them into a pattern - has a self-serving, masturbatory feel to it. Whereas the stone which Willy gives to Mary, and which she subsequently loses, seems to prepare Mary, on a psychological or symbolic level, for the business of giving Willy up and opting for Ducane. Willy's relationship with stones is other-serving; for Theo it is self-serving.

I think it is the nameless imps, or rather, as Willy introduces himself, the *nearly*-nameless imps, which from The Nice and the Good onwards especially, Murdoch has been championing. Theo and Brendan represent a striving after a non-human absolute; but the imps, like Willy, and also Nigel Boase in Bruno's Dream, Lucius Lamb in Henry and Cato, and perhaps even the suspiciously-named Impiatts in A Word Child, stand for a degree of compromise, a just-sufficient immersion in Dipple's 'muddle of human love' tempered with a just-sufficient sense of one's own worth.

The imps, rather than the saints, represent the balancing point of Murdoch's interest in the novels. Either side of that balancing point is a very large continuum which has the activities of the 'nice' characters such as Kate at one end, and the activities of 'good' characters, like Theo, at the other. Speaking of The Nice and the Good in particular, the novel's title and the progress of John Ducane, who moves like a shooting-star across the continuum in the direction of the good after his experience in the sea cave, tend to emphasise the *poles* of the pilgrimage - the cosy depths of the cave and the dazzling brink of the sunlit land - and this is probably a deliberate ploy of Murdoch's. But it should be noted that the actual movement Ducane makes is *not* from one pole to the other, but from a pole to the mid-point. He gives up Kate, but he does not move into the wings alongside Theo; instead he forms a union with Mary and Pierce and remains centre-stage.

Ducane's learning experience is obviously meant to parallel Theo's. In the sea-cave he realises that his strongest impulses have been rodent-like, selfish ones which must be starved out:

> He saw himself now as a little rat, a busy little scurrying rat seeking out its own little advantages and comforts. To live easily, to have cosy familiar pleasures, to be well thought of ... Nothing is worth doing except to kill the little rat, not to judge, not to be superior, not to exercise power, not to seek, seek, seek. To love and to reconcile and to forgive, only this matters. (32)

And when Theo's hope of returning to the monastery finally dies, he, like Ducane, is brought up short against a new apprehension of himself:

> I am sunk in the wreck of myself, thought Theo. I live in myself like a mouse inside a ruin. I am huge, sprawling, corrupt and empty. The mouse moves, the ruin moulders. This is all. (33)

The similarity of the metaphor - Theo's mouse, a more timid version of Ducane's rat* - emphasises the closeness of their experience: one of realisation of frailty and distance from goodness. Ducane spoke of 'killing the little rat', and Theo went out to Tibet confident that he could succesfully exterminate his own self, but withdrew in confusion when he discovered just how resilient that self was: how, in fact, nothing would remain once the self was withdrawn.:

> Theo had begun to glimpse the distance which separates the nice from the good, and the vision of this gap terrified his soul. He had seen, far off, what is perhaps the most dreadful thing in the world, the other face of love, its blank face. Everything that he was, even the best that he was, was connected with possessive self-filling human love. That blank demand implied the death of his whole being. (34)

Theo never recovers his enthusiasm, but he never fully recovers his self either, and remains a maimed, disappointed man. His closing wisdom, given above, is all about blankness and negativity, a stripped mode of being impossible to realise: a counsel of despair. Whereas Ducane's wisdom is a peopled landscape of positive, courageous, practical ambition: 'To love and to reconcile and to forgive'. Ducane has also learned the impish characteristic of an intelligent state of 'not knowing' ('not to judge ... not to seek'): a counsel of hope.

Murdoch's vote seems to go with the courageous, if naive, impish faction, for Theo's closing wisdom does not close the book. Instead we witness the twins, who see the flying saucer that no-one else believes in and who have the resource of a game they have invented called 'noble mice' (35).

In Bruno's Dream (1969), published the year following The Nice and the Good, the change of direction I have been describing is consolidated and merged with a new concentration of interest: in death.

Death, where it appears in Murdoch's early fiction, seems to be present chiefly to illustrate the end-point of self-transcendence. A notable example is in The Unicorn (1963) where Effingham Cooper loses his way on a bleak moorland and stumbles into a bog where he has a close encounter with death. His experience in the bog makes, at the time, a very deep impression upon him and, like Ducane in the sea-cave, he apprehends it as the most important moment in his life. However, after his chance rescue he feels, moment by moment, the impression fading to dream proportions, and finds, as in the case of dreams when one wakes up, great difficulty in communicating the impression, or even remembering it at all. However, before the vision is extinguished Effingham is able to say this much about it to his bewildered audience:

> 'Before the self vanishes nothing really is, and that's how it is most of the time. But as soon as the self vanishes everything is, and becomes automatically the object of love. Love holds the world together, and if we could only forget ourselves everything in the world would fly into perfect harmony.' (36)

This passage brings together a number of typically Murdochian attitudes to death, especially the bearing of the self upon what is real - things in the world have their reality compromised until the self departs - and the role of love as a restorer of harmony to the self-less world. The experience is rare (unique in the book), hard to communicate and hard to retain in the memory: what was a glimpse of reality to Effingham teetering on the brink of the self-less world (Theo's 'other side of love') quickly begins to seem like an unreal experience the moment he is restored to self-hood. Also, as explained earlier (see Introduction and Chapter Three), the distribution of the insight is randomly democratic: the self-absorbed Effingham achieves as much self-transcendence in his lifetime as Theo, who is perpetually conscious of the need to shift the direction of his gaze from inner to outer.

The idea of the rare and brief and largely incommunicable lesson occurs again in Henry and Cato. Lucius Lamb, a poet, has spent his whole life waiting for the resolution and the inspiration to write a great work of art, but now is old and has lost the discipline and missed his chance in a soft, easy life. Moments before his death of a stroke he scrawls out on a piece of paper an early poem:

> So many dawns I was blind to.

> Now the illumination of night
> Comes to me too late, O great teacher. (37)

In the context of his compromised, muddled life, and the wisdom he never achieved, and the great work he never wrote, the tiny poem is the pinnacle of his achievement and a restated piece of blinding inspiration just prior to the moment of his death: the eternal silence which is 'the illumination of night'. The rarity and transience of this knowledge is emphasised by Lucius being a minor character with his death an isolated incident well away from the central drama of the book. In fact we are not present at his death and merely hear it reported as a brief aside on the last page by Brendan, who can remember the name of the poem but not what it was about, the vagueness with which Lucius's ultimate knowledge is received here paralleling the incomprehension which meets Effingham's attempt to convey his own vision. Wisdom of this kind is personal, and means little if anything to the outsider. But we are left in no doubt as to the overall significance of Lucius's death-wisdom in the scheme of Henry and Cato as a whole, for the second half of the book is called 'The Great Teacher', which is also the name of Lucius's little poem.

As I said, death in the early fiction is there to illustrate the end-point of self-transcendence. But in Bruno's Dream Murdoch makes death a central theme, concentrating much more on its human significance, especially for the surviving relatives, rather than solely on its metaphysical significance for the person dying. In Diana's words, the overriding interest is with 'The helplessness of human stuff in the grip of death.' (38) Here too the role of love, and its relationship to death, is clearly seen and successfully merged with a great deal of topographical cave-play about boundaries and surfaces. The effect of this play is to alert the reader to possible 'signposting', and this expectancy in the reader is paralleled in the thoughts of Adelaide:

> Adelaide lived in a perpetual state of anxiety in a world of important signs the exact bearing of which constantly eluded her. She lived like an animal, seeing nothing beyond her immediate surroundings ... She wondered if life were like that for other people and thought it could not be so ... These people belonged to the structure of the world, to which Adelaide did not feel herself in any way attached. She felt like something very small which rattled around somewhere near the bottom and could quite easily fall out of a hole without anybody even noticing. (39)

Adelaide gives us the perspective of the benighted cave-dweller, seeing the 'important signs', the dim shadow-play cast by those fuller, more important characters who *belong* by the fire. Adelaide does not have

this sense of belonging, and her sense of material and emotional alienation is touchingly described.

We pity Adelaide her illusion that the world she glimpses is a 'stuctured' place, built upon ordered certainties. In fact when we see these envied characters we discover them to be hardly less muddled and blinded than Adelaide herself: certainty and structure are not words that spring to mind when we examine their frenetic switchings of allegiance. Adelaide had been allotted a role ('Adelaide-the Maid') which she resents, and she sees the others in the drama as having kept the best roles for themselves. Or rather, because she cannot conceptualise about role-allocating and role-playing, she cannot focus her resentment outwards, and the result is depression and self-pity.

The notion of roles is very strong in this novel, for example Diana is able to picture her relationship with Miles as follows:

> She charmed herself with the role of healer ... She was the mysterious lady of the fountain who heals the wounds of the wandering knight, the wound which has defied all other touches. (40).

And Miles, preparing to meet his father, 'had determined to play and had pictured himself playing some politer more abstract version of his old role.' (41) But of course roles can backfire too, as in the case of Bruno, 'who had been given his role and condemned for it.' (42)

The great advantage which Diana and Miles and Bruno have over Adelaide, quite apart from economic independence, is that they can conceptualise about their roles and therefore change those roles, or at least recognise the possibility of change. In terms of the cave, they have some access to the puppets which create the shadow-play and are more or less aware that it is a shadow-play.

In the same way, the alert reader, on the lookout for the kind of 'signposting' Dipple mentions, is encouraged to scorn the petty play which takes place about the fire - the romantic theme and Bruno's meanderings - and to perceive the structure whose apex points up and out of the cave. Lisa seems to confirm the presence of this structure, and locate herself on its upper tiers, when, like St John of the Cross, she speaks of a 'huge vault':

> 'We're so used to the idea that love consoles. But here one felt that even love was - nothing ... Perhaps one just suddenly saw the dimensions of what love would have to be - like a huge vault suddenly opening out overhead.' (43)

Lisa is talking about the death of her father, at which she was present, and about the inadequacy of love in the face of death, and the imagery recalls the Platonic emergence into the sunlit land, the vault of heaven. The sense of space and freedom, even if disorientating, is a positive antidote to the cramped, boundary-ridden, role-playing world of the cave. Lisa seems well qualified for such an emergence, and is in possession of all the Murdochian terminology: 'Death contradicts ownership and self', she tells Diana. Here again, death is figured as the end-point of the unselfing process, and Lisa would seem to be the ideal candidate to take the dying Bruno through that last unburdening; the worldly Diana, healer rather than releaser, admitting that she does not have the courage to take on that job herself.

But it is important to remember the overall pattern of Lisa's experience. What actually happens is that the two women swop roles. The spiritually inclined Lisa drops her plans for an ascetic life in India and elects for a good time with Danby; meanwhile Diana renounces Danby in order to minister to the dying Bruno.

To the reader, the bald fact of this turnabout is quite startling, though in fact the emotional and psychological components of each stage are convincingly described. Except to conclude lamely that 'anything goes', what can be said of this outcome?

There are three things to be noted here. Firstly, although the temptation is to view Lisa's progress as the real focus of Murdoch's interest, her recapitulation suggests that Murdoch is mocking those aspirations. Murdoch normally reserves the sudden about-turn for her weak or naive aspirers, like Michael Mead or Cato Forbes, but Lisa is neither of these. In opting for the human kind of love, she describes her decision as 'sane, *self-interestedly* sane' (Murdoch's italics), and reminds us that goodness obeys dynamic laws when she says 'You imagine I am good. But those self-denying years prove nothing.' (44) These words are addressed to Danby, but they have a sobering effect on the reader too.

Instead, it is important to notice just how much energy Murdoch invests in describing her other characters, particularly the mind and body of the dying Bruno:

> What was he now? In his own consciousness he was scarcely old at all. He could see that his hands had aged. He noticed them with puzzlement as he promenaded the two twisted dried-up heavily spotted things upon the counterpane ... He had a face now like one of his spiders, *Xysticus* perhaps, or *Oxyptila*, that have faces like toads. Below the huge emergent head the narrow body stretched away, the contingent improbable human form,

> strengthless, emaciated, elongated, smelly. He lived in a tube now, like *Atypus*, he had become a tube. (45)

The concentration here is on the subjective experience of ageing. He has become a spectator to his own body; an alienated and disgusted consciousness. His spider-like hands 'promenading' before him like a grotesque conjuring trick suggest the partial enlightenment of the pilgrim who has spied the puppet-show. Similarly, his life 'in a tube' suggests the incarceration of the cave, as well as recalling Theo's existence as 'a mouse inside a ruin' (46). But whereas the interest in Theo's state is primarily a metaphysical one (what does it *mean* to be old and defeated), the interest in Bruno's state is both metaphysical and experiential (what does it *feel like* to be old and defeated): 'When I ought to be thinking of death I am thinking of death duties,' (47) is one of Bruno's many admissions of failure.

Rodent imagery appears in Bruno's Dream - 'How well he knew this particular rat-run of his mind' (48) - but Murdoch's special success is in exploiting spider imagery, as above, with Bruno the expert arachnologist being metamorphosed into one of his own specimens. As with Eliot's Prufrock - 'I have known them all' and 'sprawled on a pin' (49) - the sense here is of both observer and observed. And Bruno describes his lost loved ones as being 'immersed in my consciuosness like specimens in formalin' (50). Here again, Bruno's position as both manipulator (puppeteer) and captive audience, 'condemned' in his role, is brilliantly conveyed by insect imagery.

Role-playing suggests boundaries, of course: certain behaviour is permissible within a role, other kinds of behaviour are not. Similarly, the existence of defined roles implies a formal world, and the possibility for Murdochian goodness is inversely proportional to the degree of formality. This brings me to a second point: if a role-free existence is the preferred mode in the Murdochian scheme, what are we to make of the character of Nigel, who seems in touch with the idea of goodness and yet also welcomes role-playing.

Murdochian orthodoxy is expressed by Lisa and her 'vaulting' ambition - her impulse to launch into a boundary-free world. Trying to help Bruno deal with painful regrets she says:

> 'There are things one can do nothing with. Try to draw a sort of quiet line round it ... You live too much in yourself ... Leave yourself. It's just an agitating puppet. Think about other things, think about anything that's good.' (51)

Lisa's counselling shows an awareness of the shadow-play (Bruno as puppet, this time) and of the need to look outwards to where goodness lies, outside the self. In this picture the self is cordoned off, deemed a no-go area, and Bruno is encouraged to roam free in the heavenly, role-free vault. There is an irony here in that a boundary is required in order to demark a boundary-free zone.

The other great counsellor in Bruno's Dream is Nigel. It is tempting to dismiss Nigel as part of the general side-show. His experiments in transcendental meditation and strange out-of-body experiences are often humorously presented, and separated from the rest of the narration by being relayed in the present tense:

> All through the holy city in the human-boxes the people utter prayers of love and hate. Unpersonned Nigel strides among them with long silent feet and the prayers rise up about him hissing faintly, like steam. (52)

In these terms Nigel is a manifestation of the hippie culture - the novel appeared in 1969 - and as such may function as a sort of contemporary toy, a diverting amusement for the reader. But we need to look deeper than this. Deflecting Diana from suicide he announces himself thus:

> 'Because I am God. Maybe this is how God appears now in the world, a little unregarded crazy person whom everyone pushes aside and knocks down and steps upon. Or it can be that I am a false God ... It matters very little ... I love you ... I love everybody ... Relax ... Love them and let them walk on you.' (53)

Nigel's advice complements Lisa's in the sense of involving a change of valuation of the self, but there is a difference. Lisa's counsel is essentially one of devaluation: shrink the self, rope it off and steer well clear. Whereas Nigel's implies a kind of infinite *expansion* of the *still-occupied* self. Nigel becomes everything, both the real God and the false God, important and 'unregarded' - all things to all men. Whereas Adelaide resented her appointed role of 'Adelaide-the-Maid', the 'unpersonned' Nigel readily accepts the mantle of 'Nigel-the-Nurse' in accordance with his policy: 'Let them walk on you'. In his guise of 'little unregarded crazy person' he also joins Lucius as the second of Murdoch's band of 'nearly-nameless imps', and that impish role is confirmed at the end of the novel when Diana remembers the words 'Relax. Let them walk on you', but without recalling the speaker: 'Who had said that to her? Perhaps no one had said it except some spirit in her own thoughts.' (54)

We see the practical application of Nigel's wisdom in the way Miles pictures his own recovery from the fact of Parvati's death:

> The pain was not less [but] ... it was as if the pain remained there but he had grown larger all round it and could contain it more easily ... He carried it inside him gently, almost gingerly, as if it were a precious egg. (55)

Here again the image is of the self expanding to engulf the experience. And whereas, under Lisa's care, the best prognosis for Bruno involved disarming or roping-off the pain, Nigel's system as applied to Miles implies a creative outcome: the pain has become a 'precious egg', fragile but also valuable. And in fact this revolution in pain-management allows Miles to overcome his writing-block and begin to produce poetry again.

The third point about the sudden role-swap which Lisa and Diana make follows on from these observations about Nigel. As we have seen, he seems to represent for Murdoch a new attitude to the self in the overall picture of goodness. The basic idea of Murdochian goodness, just to recap, involves an attenuation and gradual extinction of the self, but, as Theo and Michael Meade discovered, the basic idea is doomed to failure when taken up by the less-than-saintly. In human terms, if goodness is to be an achievable goal, then some sort of customised approach is required. In Chapter Three we saw some of these compromises in operation: Michael reluctantly discovering his fitness for 'the lower act' (56); Kate Gray's hedonistic life-by-the-fire being given value; the challenging of Dipple's assessment of the importance of 'at-homeness' (57); and the rise of Willy and the 'imps'.

Nigel is part of this general Murdochian trend towards expressing the workable human possibilities of goodness but his positive embracing of role-play is a radical departure.

William Hall (58) explores how Murdoch exploits Indian myth in order to do this. He divides Murdoch's first dozen novels into two types. Both types involve a conflict between two worlds: the world of form and the world of contingency. In the first kind, characters attempt to move out of a formal, patterned world, into one of contingency, and he discusses the progress of Martin Lynch-Gibbon in A Severed Head in these terms: rejecting the highly shaped, conventional world which he shares with his wife Antonia, in favour of the disordered inscrutability of Honor Klein's world. And for the second kind, Hall makes the point that 'while the world of form, convention ... is largely male, that of contingency is ruled by women,' (59) and cites for example the young

woman Rain Carter in The Sandcastle who, representing contingecy, disrupts and reanimates Mor's form-ridden world. Hall explains that the opposition between form and contingency coincides with the opposition between self and other, and in both cases the sense is of the two worlds irreconcilably at odds. But of Bruno's Dream he remarks that:

> Murdoch seems to be currently handling the problem of projecting these two worlds in a manner ... that will convince one of the viablity of both worlds, bringing home the sense that both worlds exist *at once*. (60)

Through the use of Indian myth, says Hall, Murdoch has managed to reconcile the worlds of form and contingency - and their correlates, self and other. Indian myth is most clearly seen in the character of Nigel, who recreates the stages of the nightwatch before the Buddha's enlightenment. Nigel acts as unseen and silent witness in a key scene:

> Danby gazes at himself in a mirror. Danby smiles at himself admiring his double row of even white teeth. Kneeling so close to him unseen Nigel smiles too, the tender, forgiving, infinitely sad smile of almighty God. (61)

What Nigel is witnessing, of course, is Danby's complacent self-absorption, and this is a familiar enough scene in Murdoch's fiction. What is different is Nigel's response. Quoting Joseph Campbell on Eastern myth, Hall has this to say:

> 'Thirty years the transcendent God was my mirror, now I am my own mirror; that which I was I am no more, the transcendent God is his own mirror. I say that I am my own mirror; for 'tis God that speaks with my tongue, and I have vanished' (62). Danby is a 'devotee' at this stage of the novel, as is Diana, of a 'cool self-love'. Thus he sees and admires in the mirror only himself; Nigel, enlightened, knowing himself a manifestation of God, sees this fact, understands it, and smiles sadly in the knowledge that Danby is looking at and loving the God without seeing him.
>
> This clearly is a new sense, a new final awareness on the part of Miss Murdoch's characters quite different from that in the earlier novels. Formerly their awareness was of the total difference of the other from the self and this led to what she called 'tolerance'. In this novel the new awareness is of the seperateness but at the same time of a recognition of the self *in* the other, which leads to what she now calls 'love'. (63)

The concept of 'tolerance' is familiar, and was explored in Chapter Two, in the conflict between Bradley and Arnold in The Black Prince. The concept of 'the self *in* the other', however, with its implication that tolerance is a half-hearted way of relating to other people, is harder for the western consciousness to grasp. And in fact Hall presents Bruno's Dream as being something of a platform for the interaction

between Nigel's eastern quietist consciousness and Bruno's 'western ego consciousness (that is significantly dying)' (64) - rather as if the one system is about to (or ought to) oust the other.

I see the combination in less contentious terms as the amalgamation of western Platonic with eastern myth. Perhaps the clearest implication this has for Murdoch's altered conception of goodness was laid as Miles's 'precious egg', which was the pain resulting from his wife's, Parvati's, death, which Nigel helped to transform into a sort of creative embryo for Miles's poetry. Hall informs us that the name Parvati literally means 'daughter of the mountain', so there is irony in the fact that she dies in a plane-crash on a mountain-side; and, quoting Jung, tells us that 'The God Shiva, as Mahadeva and Parvati, is both male and female', (65) a fusion which implies a relaxing by Murdoch of the male-female and formal-contingent oppositions she has often relied upon.

Hall draws complex parallels between Bruno' Dream and the story of Parvati, but an alternative reading suggests that Parvati's death indicates that a marriage between east and west is doomed; or possibly that the crash into the hillside - where the Platonic cave is - represents eastern consciousness accidentally impregnating western consciousness, the 'egg' then being the product of that union.

But whereas this was a creative union (though in fact we can only take it on trust that Miles goes on to produce something worthwhile), the typical offspring of the western consciousness uninvigorated by eastern genes appears sterile by comparison. We see this in a later novel, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, where Magnus's dream of turning into an egg is interpreted by Blaise as a symptom of manic egoism: 'When you've swallowed the world there's nothing left to be frightened of.'* Read from the lips of Nigel, we could take this as a positive recommendation: expand the self till it contains and becomes the world, then it can do no harm to the world and vice versa. But because this statement comes from the lips of a western myth-maker - a Freudian psychiatrist - its import is negative and reductive: shrink# the world till it's small enough to shove down your throat.

Of course, in giving the analysis Blaise intends disapproval of Magnus's egoism, but the circumstances of the analysis ironically undercut that disapproval, for Magnus's dream is in fact a lie designed to explain away Blaise's domestic absences. And Magnus himself is a 'dream': like Milo Fane, the hero of Monty's formula-fiction, he is another product of Monty's form-choked, reductive picture of the world.

So the 'egg' which Blaise's wife is metaphorically incubating - and which leads to her death - is the dream of a dream, whereas Bruno's 'dream' was at least a dream of reality: 'Reality is too hard. I have lived my life in a dream and now it is too late to wake up.' (66) And where the egg in Bruno's Dream is a viable organism, the egg in Love Machine is sterile, like the offspring of a machine - or like, to mix the metaphor, the sour shrivelled kernel of a dried-up old Freudian chestnut.

Having made this lengthy analysis of the meaning of the unexpected role-swap which Lisa and Diana make, there remains a further point to be made. Hall noticed that women characters function in some of the novels as disruptors and reanimators of a form-ridden male world; and indeed I confirmed this in Chapter One with the example of Hilary, that 'man on an assembly line' (67), whose cripplingly ordered world is rejuvenated by girlfriend Tommy. In Bruno's Dream, the formal structure of the novel is partly governed by the opposition of the two women and their eventual role-swap: rejuvenation is achieved by Lisa relaxing her own austere estimation of herself, and also by the flood which takes place which, significantly, completes the disordering of Bruno's once orderly stamp-collection. In this novel we have the unusual situation of female characters imposing the governing form. More interesting still, the vacant role created by Lisa's spiritual self-demotion - Indian exile - is taken up by Nigel, who decides to go in her place to Calcutta.

One way of looking at this reshuffling of the cast is as the kind of felicitous pairing off which happens at the end of many Shakespearean comedies, the playwright making an eleventh-hour concession to the need for his play to express social order, and in fact Diana acknowledges our suspicions:

> We've all paired off really, in the end. Miles has got his muse, Lisa has got Danby. And I've got Bruno. Who would have thought it would work out like that? (68)

But an alternative is to view this as a rare example in Murdoch's fiction of a male character as it were servicing the formal needs of a female character, rather than the other way round; for, it could be argued, the disappearance of an Indian exile figure from the novel would amount to a formal flaw. Nigel, in taking on the role - and, as we have seen, Nigel willingly takes on roles - frees Lisa from this constraint. The usual pattern, as in the case of Martin Lynch-Gibbon and Hilary Burde and Bradley Pearson and Charles Arrowby, is for the women-folk to service, or attempt to disrupt, the formal requirements of the men. But

in this novel the pattern is reversed, suggesting an entirely new way in which Murdoch may be subverting the dominance imposed by male characters in her novels.

In Bruno's Dream we see Nigel, like Willy Kost, fuctioning as 'nearly-nameless imp', but also, to use a footballing term, operating as a sweeper, a roving defender, fielding stray roles to protect more vulnerable characters, particularly the female ones, who would otherwise be constrained by formal restrictions. In Henry and Cato, Lucius Lamb functions in a similar way, but Murdoch loads him with so many handicaps that she makes of him a new kind of imp. Whereas Nigel and Willy were conscious of their function, and able to express it to the other characters, and therefore *able to inhabit* that role with some degree of self-confidence, Lucius takes on the role without that luxury. It is as though, to return to the footballing metaphor, the manager has privately instructed Lucius to operate as sweeper, but has neglected to tell the rest of the team, so that Lucius is constantly being scorned and abused for not doing his job properly, even when he is.

What seems to be happening, in terms of the progress of Murdoch's fiction, is that having established the impish mould, Murdoch is now, with Lucius, attempting to see how he will operate as a character when stripped of his authority. The parallel can be seen in her treatment of her near-saintly creations: as I explained at the start of this chapter, Hugo and Bledyard achieved a large measure of authority because the reader did not get to see the minute-by-minute fabric of their thinking; whereas in later novels, for example with Tallis and Theo, intimate access to those inner-processes effectively robs those characters of their authority as near-saints. If this diminution is true of imp Lucius, then it is ironic that in the same book the near-saint character of Brendan Craddock is the last case I can find in the Murdoch catalogue of such an aspirant being granted the privacy of his own thoughts; though perhaps Brendan's revelation that his off-stage mother is the only true saint (discussed in Chapter Three) does something to undercut even his authority.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed Lucius's qualification for imp status: his small, unregarded part in the drama balanced by the startling wisdom of his tiny poem 'The Great Teacher', which impresses the fastidious Brendan and gives its name to the second half of the book. Looking more closely at his position, and comparing it with that

of Brendan, the central drama of this novel occurs between the eponymous Henry and Cato, and Lucius has an onstage but minor role in the drama. 'Saint' Brendan, on the other hand, is almost in the wings, and the scenes in which he appears have the feel of interludes between the spells of frantic action. However, the picture is more complicated than this, for, whereas Brendan has the support of his Jesuit background, and the security of a fixed role - the same can be said of James Arrowby - Lucius has no such support or security. Face-to-face with the newly-returned Henry he responds thus:

> 'Well, Trundle, slept, yes, I bet?' Lucius's enthusiastic tones betrayed an uncertainty about his own role. Was he a paternal figure, a jolly uncle, or just a slightly older contemporary? ... Henry was not going to help him solve the difficulty of tone ... Soon thinking about himself, Lucius went up the stairs ... He clicked his teeth a little. They still felt enormous. He knew that the great grief of the house passed him by, simply missing him entirely. He felt useless and sentimental and sad. He wished that Gertrude would break down so that he could console her ... But she had not turned to him ... A failed poet, that was what he was, it was quite the best thing to fail at. (69)

The interest here is on Lucius's inability to find a niche for himself at Laxlinden Hall, and the general unwillingness of characters around him to render up roles he could easily fill, and also on his tendency to self-absorption, his physical deterioration with age - reminiscent of Bruno - and his consoling role as failed poet. His preoccupations incline him away from the path of goodness: as we have seen, goodness is to do with relinquishing roles, scorning self-absorption, setting ones dignity and personal comfort at nought, and having an attitude to art which is anything but consoling. One might expect to see evidence of authorial disaproval here, and yet Lucius is treated by the narrator with great compassion, so much so that Henry's picturing of Lucius in Shakespearean language as daring to 'parade about between the fell incensed points of mighty opposites' (70) - meaning Henry and Gerda - which is intended to make Lucius look pathetic and insignificant, in fact backfires on Henry.

However, authorial reproof is implied when Lucius uses a bat image to figure the process of artistic creation, for this accidentally evokes the cave myth: 'All you have to do', he thinks, 'is just record your thoughts one by one, like bats emerging from a hole' (71). In the haiku, Lucius has discovered 'instant poetry' (72), and if the one quoted in the text is representative of the general quality of his output, then the hundred he has written about Gerda must make dismal

reading. If we cast about for comparative pictures of the creative process - the war-with-words which TS Eliot descibes, discussed in Chapter One, with which Murdoch's view has so much affinity ('every attempt/ Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure' [72a]); the explosive force of the pressure-vessel analogy* Eliot discusses in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (73); the haunting torment of the unexpressed emotion he is drawn to in Beddoes ('a bodiless childfull of life in the gloom/ Crying with frog voice, "What shall I be?"' [74]); or indeed Murdoch's own stern recommendation to the true artist to say 'no and no and no to the prompt easy visions of self-protective, self-promoting fantasy' (75) - if we bring these pictures to mind, and remember also the near-impossible task faced by the pilgrim in escaping from the cave, then we can see that Lucius's bat-cave easy facility with words is being severely frowned on.

What is so interesting about this image is that it links Lucius's artistic mediocrity directly with Cato's moral over-optimism. Here is Cato passing almost bat-like out of the cave of his own self:

> He entered quite quietly into a sort of white joy, as if he had not only emerged from the cave, but was looking at the Sun and finding that it was easy to look at, and that all was white and pure and not dazzling, not extreme, but gentle and complete. (76)

Emergence is itself a rare enough phenomenon, and talk of 'looking at the Sun' without even being dazzled must raise our suspicions, and in fact Cato fails to live up to this image. One feels that he is appropriately punished for the conceit by his experience in the pitch-dark cellar where, in true cave-novice fashion, he is subjected to a terrifying shadow-play - an illusion stage-managed by Beautiful Joe. Cato is sobered to a more realistic assessment of the true task facing the pilgrim, and of his own pathetic inadequacy in that respect. This shedding of illusion is what Cato wanted, and also what Henry yearned for in his wish for a 'stripped life' (77), but it comes upon him too quickly to be an assimilable experience: it is a case of what Conradi called a 'too-sudden decentering' (see Chapter Three), bringing madness and despair, rather than enlightenment and courage. As imp Willy warns: 'Very few ordeals are redemptive ... You see, in hell one lacks the energy for any good change. This indeed is the meaning of hell.' (78)

However, despite the heavy caution against spiritual over-reaching, Henry and Cato does seem to endorse the need for spiritual ambition in a fresh way. We see Cato try and fail, and similarly we hear Henry admit

that all along he has been 'mistaking [his] moral level' (79), just as Michael Meade concedes that he was only worthy of 'the lower act' (see Chapter Three). But what seems most important in this book is not whether these aspirers succeed or not - in Eliot's words, 'For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business' (80) - or how hard a bump they come down to earth with, but whether they can maintain the *image of the pilgrimage* for the spiritual safekeeping of others.

Image-promotion seems a very anti-Murdochian notion, and yet this book is full of it. We see this in Henry's attitude to the de-frocked Cato:

> About this he felt a curiously deep sense of personal loss. Cato had somehow figured in his future plans as a sort of mysterious guide or sage, full of radiant certainties. Henry felt betrayed, let down. A struggling secularized Cato, no better than himself, would be of little use. (81)

In this picture, Cato is no longer the pilgrim as such, but the imperious guide that Plato speaks of in the myth, who 'hales along' the reluctant pilgrim. Beautiful Joe's reaction to the cassockless Cato is identical, though less articulate:

> 'And I thought you'd still be a priest, and that would make it all right ... All the - all the sort of - magic's gone - what made me care - Now you're just a queer in a cord coat.' (82)

And Colette regards Cato's lost calling in the same light:

> 'It made a kind of place, an otherness. I can't explain. Not like magic exactly - but something precious and holy - even though I didn't believe - I wish you'd stayed there.' (83)

But this curious faith-by-proxy does not end with Cato, for a sort of chain or network of transferred beliefs develops when the doubting Cato reveals that 'Brendan was keeping his God safe for him' (84). Brendan, however, turns out not to believe in a personal God either, although he recognises the need to maintain the fiction of one. We can see the links in the chain under stress when Henry says of Cato:

> 'God will look after Cato ... People like Cato invent God. He exists for them. We can't do it. We lesser folk just sponge on the God that holy men invent.' (85)

This is not quite cynicism from Henry, not quite atheism, but more an admission that there is a higher level of belief which Cato is in touch with, and which Henry - with mock-humility - is unable to emulate. We might not expect Brendan to endorse this, but in fact he comes very close when advising Cato how to behave towards Colette:

> 'Colette loves you and her greatest need is to feel that she can help you. You must meet that need, even by pretence until the pretence becomes real. They all need you.' (86)

Notice Brendan's phrasing: 'even by pretence'. We have seen how, from about the time of The Nice and the Good (1968), Murdoch has come to place more value on human love, and that this shift of emphasis has been achieved partly through her impish characters - Willy, Nigel and now Lucius. That revaluation has to some extent proceeded alongside a corresponding reduction in the status given to aspiring pilgrims like Theo and Lisa. But with Brendan in Henry and Cato (1976), even though he is allowed to retain most of his near-saintly authority, ironically, Murdoch has him say, in the closing scene, an extraordinarily un-Murdochian line: meeting the needs of another 'even by pretence' endorses *active* collaboration in the fiction-factories of other people's minds - Nigel's 'let them walk on you' (87) is at least a *passive* expression.

And the statement cannot be retrieved into the realms of orthodoxy merely by acknowledging that Brendan is shepherding us towards *other people's* fantasies, on the assumption that other people's fantasies are somehow less anti-good than our own, for, to recall the blunt message in The Sovereignty of Good: 'The Self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion' (88) - that is to say, it is the products of *the* self, of any self, that we are warned against, not merely the products of our own self. In these terms, Brendan's advice seems for the first time in Murdoch's writing to raise human love to a position of supreme importance - above even the notion of the perfect love which permits access to the sunlit land, the vision of reality.

With this reassessment in mind it is now time to look at the final stage of the Platonic myth, where the enlightened pilgrim re-enters the cave with the object of communicating his blinding vision of goodness to his benighted neighbours. In the original myth, the bringer of wisdom finds himself mocked by and alienated from the disbelievers, and that is also true of Murdoch's account. However, the following chapter will also discuss the implications of the additional handicap that Murdoch's homing-pilgrims suffer from: the fact that Murdoch herself now appears to have undercut the importance of the quest for goodness, and to have elevated human love in its place.

CHAPTER FIVE : A New Optimism in *The Philosopher's Pupil* and *The Good Apprentice*

> And again, do you think it at all strange, said I, if the man returning from divine contemplations to the petty miseries of men cuts a sorry figure and appears most ridiculous, if, while still blinking through the gloom, and before he has become sufficiently accustomed to the environing darkness, he is compelled in courtrooms or elsewhere to contend about the shadows of justice or the images that cast the shadows and to wrangle in debate about the notions of these things in the minds of those who have never seen justice itself? (1)

In the final stage of Plato's myth, the pilgrim returns into the cave to disseminate the wisdom he has gained in the sun among the benighted denizens there. This corresponds to the state of mind where, having learned the hard discipline of self-denial which makes possible the glimpse of reality - the ultimate Form of Justice and Good itself - the problem is then how to maintain that discipline among the ordinary bustle of life, and, harder still, how to encourage the love of that discipline among other men and women.

As explained in Chapter Four, although Murdoch's attention is spread fairly democratically over all stages of the pilgrimage, publication of The Nice and the Good (1968) marks a focussing of interest on life as lived by the fire. The special features of this shift of interest were charted through Bruno's Dream (1969) and Henry and Cato (1976). But The Philosopher's Pupil (1983) and the three books which follow it all show a new shift of attention towards the experience of the returning pilgrim. The notion of return, and the paradox that physical movement is actually irrelevant in terms of enlightenment - is now a major feature.

It is my purpose here to discuss the implications of that switch as they reveal themselves in The Philosopher's Pupil and the novel which follows it, The Good Apprentice (1985)*, especially in the light of Brendan Craddock's remark in Henry and Cato that needs must be met 'even by pretence until the pretence becomes real' (2). The obligation on the returning pilgrim is to relay his glimpse of reality to the underground world, and yet here we have Brendan - himself a spokesman for the sunlit land - exhorting Cato to the compromise of a 'pretence', and much play is made with that compromise in the later fiction. In particular, Murdoch's developing attitude to 'the "myth" that heals' (3) will be examined.

Bearing in mind the above, and the fact that the relationship between the fabricated and the real seems to be being revised in the later fiction,

I will also discuss in this chapter the status of Murdoch's novels *as* fabrications, that is to say, their overall construction as art objects.

Return is a recurrent theme in Murdoch's fiction: much of the action in Nuns and Soldiers is triggered by the return of Anne Cavidge from her convent life back into the world of the people she left behind; A Fairly Honourable Defeat opens with the Fosters meditating upon the implications of the return of Julius King; and similar obsessive speculations centre upon the return of David Crimond in The Book and the Brotherhood (1987) and of Marcus Vallar in A Message to the Planet (1989) - in fact this last title even hints at the concluding stage of the pilgrim's journey.

Sometimes return appears as a positive feature, for example Anne Cavidge facing up to her doubts about her vocation. In Henry and Cato, Lucius finds himself the prisoner of a household which, under Gerda, has become so severely formal as to be swept clean of the 'affectionate nonsensical rubble which pads out the conversation of true couples' (4), and the arrival of the prodigal Henry permits an inrush of trans-Atlantic informality which is both anarchic and refreshing. Greeting the servant instead of Gerda produces a gasp of offended propriety from his mother:

> Henry, who had thought first that one did not kiss servants, thought next that he had not kissed his mother. He suddenly wanted to laugh. (5)

Of course the new regime under Henry quickly degenerates into just another form of tyranny, but that initial inrush generates some lasting flexibility of action for all the characters.

More often, however, return appears as a negative or ambiguous feature, for instance the Fosters argue over whether Julius should be welcomed back as a saint or spurned as a sinner: is he to be praised for giving up his research into biological warfare, or condemned for becoming involved in it in the first place? And in The Philosopher's Pupil, the return of Rozanov coincides significantly with one of the periods of 'unhealthy excitement or "moral unrest"' (6) the narrator speaks of as afflicting Ennistone from time to time.

What is so interesting about The Philosopher's Pupil and The Good Apprentice is that, to a degree never before seen in Murdoch's fiction, the return involved is the specifically Platonic one of the pilgrim to the cave, his attempts to find a niche there, and the responses of his one-time fellow prisoners. Two kinds of returnee are seen in these books.

In The Philosopher's Pupil, the very title suggesting the attempt to disseminate wisdom*, we have John Robert Rozanov, the famous philosopher, a man with a mission '*to write down nothing but the truth*' (7) (Murdoch's italics). Like Theo he has seen through the surface of things to 'chaos, the uncategorised manifold, the ultimate jumble of the world, before which the metaphysician covers his eyes' (8) - this unfriendly, nightmarish jumble being the antithesis of the 'affectionate nonsensical rubble' which Lucius prizes. Now he is returning to his childhood home, where the Ennistonians regard him as 'come home to write his great book' and 'returned like a priest-king to his people' (9). In The Good Apprentice, the title again suggesting a pupil-teacher relationship, Stuart Baltram drops out of formal education in order to devote himself full-time to the pursuit of goodness. He sees himself as a kind of 'Good Samaritan' (10), though he comes to be regarded as 'a moral Samuri' (11) amongst his family and friends. The two men, Rozanov and Stuart, thus represent two different routes to goodness: the philosophic and the spiritual routes respectively.

It may be argued that these two characters fail to qualify for the role of returnee because we have no clear evidence, as we do with say Effingham Cooper in The Unicorn, that they have actually experienced enlightenment. Rozanov's glimpse of the 'ultimate jumble' denies the sense of a *unified* reality which is supposed to be vouchsafed to the successful pilgrim, and which, according to Murdoch, good art nudges us towards:

> Good art reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognise, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form. (12)

But Rozanov is aware of the paradox, and shows that awareness in his struggle to state 'the crystalline truth' (13):

> He perceived amazing similarities, startling light-bringing connections, problems which seemed utterly disparate merged into one, suddenly and with dream-like ease, then when the great synthesis seemed at last at hand, fell apart into strings of aphorisms. He gazed and gazed with amazement at what was most ordinary, most close, until the light of wonder faded, leaving him unenlightened, without clue and without key. Philosophy may be called a sublime ability to say the obvious, to exhibit what is closest. But what is closest is what is farthest. (14)

Rozanov is here teetering on the brink of the great revelation, he sees the network of 'connections' without quite seeing the overall unifying form. His problem, which is also the problem of the good man, is one of vision, how to see what is close and *at the same time* see what is far away. To draw a parallel, a plant biologist who investigates living cell contents

will work on a microscopic scale, but a geomorphologist who studies land shapes will work on a macroscopic scale. Rozanov is attempting the double vision of the scientist who is looking at the activity of cell mitochondria, say, while trying to focus on the formation of coral reefs: linked phenomena separated in our understanding by a mighty chasm of scale. The human eye and the optical instruments made by man are incapable of encompassing such a huge depth of field. Rozanov shows himself tantalisingly close to bridging that gap, but his special problem, the problem of the moral philosopher, is that he must also find 'the ability to say', in other words a way to articulate that multi-vision: to speak of the small-scale in the same breath as the large scale. This is an especially difficult problem, for the language in which to do it has not yet been developed. As Murdoch herself puts it, brilliantly fusing the metaphors of language and vision into the moral equation: 'We need a new vocabulary of attention' (15).

Rozanov, in terms of enlightenment, is thus in the interesting position of not quite being able to say what he believes in but has not quite experienced. Effingham may seem a better candidate for returnee, for he at least clearly undergoes enlightenment, but, after one abortive attempt to explain what he has experienced, the moral amnesia sets in and the book ends without any attempt to test the galvanised Effingham against, in Plato's words, 'the minds of those who have never seen justice itself'. And similarly, in the case of Bradley Pearson, he passes up his courtroom opportunity to 'contend about the shadows of justice' and opts instead for loss of liberty and silence, and dies without any attempt, reader aside, to report on his 'divine contemplations' on the nature of Eros.

It is as though the notes of the authentic foreign correspondent are always doomed to crumble to dust before they can be broadcast to the world, or as though there is truly *nothing to report* about the sunlit land. Two kinds of *audience* need to be distinguished here. There is the (hopefully) patient and sympathetic reader of the account, in whom the pilgrim is able to confide, and then there is the incredulous and indifferent or even hostile 'world' of the other characters in the novel, who ignore or pillory the pilgrim, and mishear what he has to say.

We should also remember that true enlightenment involves not movement but vision. Plato's myth suggests that the pilgrim must go somehwere and then come back. But the glamorous notion of a journey - in time or in space - is constantly exposed by Murdoch as misleading (see Chapter One), as for example when in The Philosopher's Pupil Father Bernard goes all the way to Delphi to discover that

> 'the power that saves is infinitely simple and infinitely close at hand ... There is no beyond, there is only here, the infinitely small, the infinitely great and utterly demanding present.' (16)

And he acknowledges the problem of communication when he concedes in his correspondence: 'I cannot go on. It is sacrilege to utter words which are bound to be misunderstood' (17). The sunlit land, to resurrect the cliche, is indeed nothing to write home about.

Again, in The Good Apprentice, Edward journeys far and wide to seek a cure for his spiritual illness, but at the end of the book when he comes to assess his progress he is forced to see

> the awful fact was that he had not moved an inch, all movement, all journeying, had been an illusion, he was back at the beginning ... back in hell ... It seemed as if something was happening, but I was having a dream ... The light which I saw wasn't the sun. It was just a reflection of the fires of hell. (18)

So in these two books we have Murdoch experimenting with the philosopic and spiritual returnees as never before. They face the usual hazards in that their general audience, reader aside, is unresponsive or even overresponsive - as Father Bernard remarks on the local response to Rozanov: 'you are too *interested*, it is for you a spectacle' (19) - but they are extraordinarily hampered, beyond the normal strictures of the myth and its Murdochian interpretation, in that they have not even had the nebulous experience which they are struggling to articulate. But here again, as Bernard reminds us, the paradox intrudes that true experience precludes the 'sacrilege' of 'words which are bound to be misunderstood'.

These summaries have a severely pessimistic tone, as though, assuming that the soul really does retain a memory of Plato's Forms, this distant memory is hopelessly overlaid by the nearer impressions in the hearts and minds of the 'dreamers'. And yet despite this apparent pessimism - in Bruno's words: 'Reality is too hard. I have lived my life in a dream and now it is too late to wake up' (20) - the overall feel of these novels is remarkably optimistic. Perhaps this is because, unlike Dipple (see Chapter Four), Murdoch does not undervalue the dream, but delineates it as meticulously as if it were the longed-for reality to which we are exhorted to attend. In fact, if we take any key binary opposites in Murdoch's fiction we can see that her interest in the 'better' half of any pairing is always at least matched by her interest in its necessary counterpart: reality is anathema to the dream, and yet her dreamers more than outnumber her reality-seekers; vision has sovereignty over movement, and yet the

lookers are overwhelmed by the doers; silence is preferred over articulateness, and yet her novels are full of chatterers - and in fact Murdoch herself, in terms of her fiction output, is an inveterate chatterer.

Often the novels are enervated by an almost self-conscious sense of the tension between binary pairs, as for example in The Good Apprentice, in the confrontation between Harry and Thomas. Harry is having an affair with Thomas's wife, and wills a kind of Wild-West showdown with his rival, who is attempting to be reasonable:

> [Thomas] thought, how typical of Harry to imagine I was reaching for a gun when all I wanted was something to clean my glasses! But if he still thinks I was, let him. He lives in a world of romance, romanticised violence. The gun idea ... was in a way the right one. I could have killed him at that moment. (21)

This is not just a fight over a woman, but is a contest between action and vision: the urge to make something happen, symbolised by the gun, versus the need to see more clearly, symbolised by the glasses. The word 'romance' also seems to acknowledge the preference of the reader: we would quite like to see the scene end in gunshots and bloodshed, whereas the incident actually ends with the distraction of a robin flying into the room, which could be seen as the disruption of the drama which Harry is trying to script by a fragment of the contingent world outside that drama.

Similarly, through Stuart, this novel self-consciously struggles to utter concepts which, as we have seen, by their very nature enjoin silence. Here is the narrator relaying the Stuart ethos:

> Stuart pictured the Good Samaritan as being intently reflective at suitable intervals about the man he had helped (for instance by sending the inkeeper some more money), but as otherwise dismissing the matter from his mind. Anything in the nature of drama, of brooding or gloating or re-enacting, was alien to Stuart, as was also joyous or gleeful anticipation ... His mind refused it, spewed it out, not as a dangerous temptation, but as alien tissue. Of course he wanted to be 'good'; and so he wanted to avoid guilt and remorse, but those states did not *interest* him ... He knew there was no supernatural being and did not design to try to attach the concept in any way to his absolutes. If something, 'good' or something, was his 'master', it was in no personal or reciprocal relation. His language was thus indeed odd ... his love went out into the cosmos as a lonely signal, but also miraculously could return to earth (22)

Stuart takes a story, a Christian parable about self-sacrifice and compassion without pride, and carefully strips it of all potential glamour* for either the listener or his own conscience. In doing so he also diffuses the story's potential *as* a story, a piece of 'drama', which is of course the principle learning strategy which the parable form employs. This rejection

of the story element is not merely a policy decision, as it was for Thomas when presented with the notion of returning Harry's violence, the fending off of a 'dangerous temptation', but is an automatic response, figured as the violent reaction of a transplant patient to 'alien tissue'. This is not though an innate response, but one he has learned through meditation. Notice too that, like Rozanov, he is struggling to forge a new, an 'odd' language, but in lieu of a new vocabulary he must use the makeshifts of the old one, qualifying it ('something, "good" or something') with inverted commas and awkward phrasing. The image of Stuart's brand of impersonal love going out as a 'lonely signal' into the cosmos is also a reminder of the Count in Nuns and Soldiers, sitting hunched over his wireless listening to the shipping forecasts and anguishing over imagined souls adrift on the high seas. The Count here seems to play receptor to Stuart's 'miraculous' transmission of perfect, disinterested love.

In Louis MacNeice's poem 'Birmingham' (23), the same notion of the 'lonely signal' is present in the suburbs:

> In these houses men as in a dream pursue the Platonic Forms
> With wireless and cairn terriers and gadgets approximating to
> the fickle norms
> And endeavour to find God and score one over the neighbour
> By climbing tentatively upward on jerry-built beauty and sweated
> labour.

The sense is of the 'dreamers' trying to tune their little 'wireless' sets onto wavelengths emitted by the perfected Forms, a strangely optimistic idea which Murdoch seems, with Stuart and the Count, to share. Of course, in the MacNeice the tone is partly sarcastic, the wireless and other modern 'gadgets' are part of the new array of nineteen-thirties consumer durables with which these social 'climbers' attempt to 'score one over the neighbour'. We can see the sarcasm through the way consumer *durables* are mocked (permanent 'Platonic Forms' rhymed with the transitory 'fickle norms'), and in the way spiritual aspirations are juxtaposed with material ones: the poetry of this period is riddled with such cynicism. But MacNeice, like Murdoch, is also inexhaustably compassionate towards his 'dreamers', sharing an interest in the outcome of the rigged roulette of their very *human* affections:

> Next week-end it is likely in the heart's funfair we shall pull
> Strong enough on the handle to get back our money; or at any
> rate it is possible.

The neat rhyming couplets suddenly fail at this point, suggesting there will be no jackpot, no payout at all, and that 'we' also implicates the poet-

narrator in the gamble. But despite this compassionate pessimism, MacNeice still rejoices in a world which, though it can be tawdry and ugly, is still invested in a spiritual ('pentecostal') beauty and wonder:

> Zeppelin clouds, and pentecost-like the car's headlights bud
> Out from sideroads and the traffic signals, Creme-de-menthe
> or bull's blood

The wireless metaphor hints at something very odd about Stuart. Murdoch's characters often seem to generate or to move through spaces which are permeated by radiation of one sort or another, like the 'piercing stellar ray' (24) which Kate Gray emits in The Nice and the Good, under which influence the other characters orbit like satellites; or the 'electric charge' (25) of spiritual energy in The Philosopher's Pupil which, as Bernard explains ('we are surrounded by it') is released when suffering is shared. But what we are most conscious of with Stuart is the sense of a void. Here he is sitting in an empty church meditating upon the fact that, God included, '*There was no one there*':

> Perhaps this separateness, this cutoffness, this determined not-mindingness had to do with the absence of his mother, the earliest truth in his life, the absence of complete love together with the haunting idea of it not as a real possiblity but as an abstract, an invisible sun giving light but no warmth. (26)

In Henry and Cato we saw Brendan being in some measure sustained by the notion of his dead mother as a saint. With Stuart we have 'absence' too, but it does not give any sustenance, any 'warmth'. Instead it is figured as an 'invisible sun', the kind of stark radiation on offer to the would-be pilgrim. In fact, what impresses Stuart is not so much his mother's *actual* absence, a familiar enough feature in an author's arsenal of character-forming traits, but the notion of her absence 'in the abstract'; much as though, even if Stuart had been blessed with a close relationship with his mother, he would have found a way to dis-invent her, or, to put it in terms of the myth, he would have found it necessary to eclipse this fire in the cave (his mother) - to 'banish her image' (27), as he puts it - in order to perceive the light from the sun.

Stuart's instinct or policy of 'cutoffness' induces a hated leper status which is also the fate of Plato's returned pilgrim:

> he felt ... a shameful loneliness and sadness and grief, as if he were both banished from the human race and condemned for eternity to be a useless and detested witness of its sufferings. (28)

And we see the same toxic symptoms of alienation in his half-brother, Edward, who, unable to find a cure for his spiritual malaise, feels

> sick with a pointlessness and loneliness which deprived him of his sense of himself. He felt a fright at not existing, a feeling of the entirely precarious nature of identity, such as healthy people leading ordinary lives sometimes perceive as a sudden quick glimpse of insanity and death. (29)

With Stuart and Edward, Murdoch gives us a great deal of their inner thoughts, carefully cataloguing their diminishing sense of self. Edward operates as a control, a fairly 'normal' young man in the sense of having an initially well developed sense of self which is then dramatically eroded by a catastrophe (he is implicated in the death of a friend). Stuart is the main focus of the test: a young man with an initially more precarious sense of self than Edward, who then attempts to progressively weaken his own sense of self from within. The chief point of comparison is thus in the manner in which sense of self is relinquished: by external (Edward) or internal (Stuart) means. As the extracts above show, the consequences are remarkably similar for both candidates. This kind of experiment perhaps represents the only remaining sense in which Murdoch could be termed an 'existentialist' writer, for it links her with the ideas of RD Laing in The Divided Self (1960), which is subtitled *An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. In this book Laing defines the condition of ontological security - what Edward felt before the catastrophe:

> A man may have a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person. As such he can live out into the world and meet others: a world and others experienced as equally real, alive, whole, and continuous.
>
> Such a basically *ontologically* secure person will encounter all the hazards of life, social ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity. (30)

Ontological security is not merely an idea, but a *sense of being* developed mainly in early childhood, and as such is difficult to shake. Laing defines the opposite condition, ontological insecurity, partly through literary models. Here he is quoting Lionel Trilling on the contrasting worlds created by Shakespeare and Kafka:

> Shakespeare's world, quite as much as Kafka's, is that prison cell which Pascal says the world is, from which daily the inmates are led forth to die; Shakespeare no less than Kafka forces upon us the cruel irrationality of the conditions of human life, the tale told by an idiot, the puerile gods who torture us not for punishment but for sport; and no less than Kafka, Shakespeare is revolted by the fetor of the prison of

this world, nothing is more characteristic of him than his imagery of disgust. But in Shakespeare's cell the company is so much better than in Kafka's, the captains and kings and lovers and clowns of Shakespeare are alive and complete before they die. In Kafka, long before the sentence is executed, even long before the malign legal process is even instituted, something terrible has been done to the accused. We all know what that is - he has been stripped of all that is becoming to a man except his abstract humanity, which, like his skeleton, never is quite becoming to a man. He is without parents, home. wife, child, commitment, or appetite; he has no connection with power, beauty, love, wit, courage, loyalty, or fame, and the pride that may be taken in these. So that we may say that Kafka's

> knowledge of evil exists without the contradictory knowledge of the self in its health and validity, that Shakespeare's knowledge of evil exists with that contradiction in its fullest possible force. (31)

We have seen how Murdoch is allied to Shakespeare through her belief in tolerance (see Chapter Two), but the experiment in The Good Apprentice seems to ally her more with Kafka. 'Good' characters in previous Murdoch novels, like Brendan Craddock and James Arrowby, may be extremely self effacing but they remain ontologically secure, and this concept may be seen to apply equally well even to Lucius Lamb and Nigel Boase, for their particular brand of insecurity relates to their present condition, rather than to a fundamental outlook developed in early childhood. But Stuart, with his instinct for 'cutoffness', seems to be attempting the path of goodness with the well-developed pattern of 'no connection' seen in Kafka's no-hopers. This is something new. Thus Stuart, struggling to 'contend about the shadows of justice', is not merely up against Kafka's 'malign legal process' but must also acknowledge his own ontological insecurity, and the fact that a policy of deliberate self-emaciation is bound to exacerbate that condition.

Sense of being is one issue im Murdoch's later novels, and so is the related notion of apprenticeship. The title The Philosopher's Pupil suggests the relationship between Plato and his mentor, Socrates, the younger man learning the hard discipline of reasoned argument, and George is in fact the admiring ex-pupil of philosopher Rozanov. But the book is much more an account of apprenticeship to demonic sorcery. As George himself says to Rozanov:

> 'We're alike, you know. We're both demons, you're a big one and I'm a little one, the big ones make the little ones scream. You hate me because I'm a caricature of you. Isn't that so?' (32)

The skill George is acquiring, in a way which his words reveal as both willed and unwilled, is that of enchantment. Father Bernard acknowledges employing the same skill on his congregation:

> He was well aware of his reputation for being 'not a priest but a shaman'. He did not mind. Salvation itself was magic: total redemption by cosmic act of the whole visible world. His own cruder spells, material symbols of a spiritual grace, were surely acceptable. Acceptable to whom? Father Bernard had ceased to believe in God. (33)

Bernard has discarded God in favour of Christ, figured here as the high priest of magic, the Crucifixion and subsequent Resurrection being the climax of the supreme magic show, Bernard humbly conjuring along in his wake.

And in The Good Apprentice, when Edward reluctantly goes to see psychiatrist Thomas McCaskerville to get help with his crisis, he complains:

> 'You want to interest me, to make me think of other people, but I don't want to be cured and have it all turned into cheerfulness and commonsense by your magic. Your magic isn't strong enough to overcome what I have, it's weak, it's a failing torch.' (34)

But the 'magic' can be seen to take two forms. In the case of George we could call it a black magic, being concerned chiefly with role-playing, self-deception, self-gratification and a self-enlargement which, following George's progress, is characterised by destruction. In contrast, Thomas practices white magic*, a form of enchantment which is intended to be healing and temporary - a custom-made remedy which is to be applied for the duration of the cure and then discarded: in other words one to which the patient will not become addicted. Compounding the remedy is also a creative process - 'the "myth" that heals is an individual work of art' (35), Thomas reminds himself - and the cure is one which, ideally, is supposed to help the patient without compromising the practitioner by inflating his ego. Bernard professes white magic too, purveying religion, the kind of myth-system which provides the sustenance of meaning in the lives of his congregation, though, like Cato ('Charisma Forbes: the swinging priest' [36]) in Henry and Cato, he has become something of a grey practitioner, a little corrupted by the power he wields, and conscious too of how his remedies may be misused by his patients.

Magic, in the broad sense, is a familiar feature of Murdoch's writing - for example, The Flight from the Enchanter is the title of her second novel. True magic, such as amazing transformations or inexplicable apparitions, occasionally takes place in the fiction, like the appearance of the flying saucers at the end of The Nice and the Good, which turn up again in The Philosopher's Pupil (194), but mostly the magic Murdoch is interested in

has a rational source, in that it arises out of characters' weakness for fantasy in preference to reality. So enchantment, and especially its suggestive synonym *captivation* - a case in point being the mutual enslavement caused by George's demon-pairing with Rozanov - is the usual form in which Murdochian magic appears. As such, and with our accumulated understanding of the pilgrimage, it is easy to detect the authorial frown which generally accompanies an episode of enchantment, those out-takes from the endless fantasy loop, the *eikasia*, which runs in the cinematic cave of the psyche: as James Arrowby authoritatively pronounces on Charles's romance with Hartley, which ends in literal captivation: 'You've made it into a story, and stories are false.' (37) Only the most unadorned of basic facts are permissible to the true pilgrim: any attempt to shape them into a story or a personal mythology is enchantment, is anti-real, therefore anti-good.

But in The Philospher's Pupil and The Good Apprentice Murdoch takes up a much more ambiguous attitude to enchantment by championing the benign captivation of Thomas's '"myth" that heals', which, with its medical metaphor, connects with Brendan's softened position on illusion-making as meeting the needs of others 'even by pretence until the pretence becomes real' (see Chapter Four). What we get is black and white magic jostling one another, with some grey mixing going on between the two*. So, for example, when Edward goes looking for a healer, he journeys to a variety of stalls, so to speak, and samples the concoctions on offer from rival practitioners: Mrs Quaid (the spirit medium), his father, his step-father, his step-mother, Stuart, and of course Thomas himself. The reader is required to separate the quacks from the genuine healers.

Again, in The Philosopher's Pupil, there is a distinction to be made between Tom McCaffrey's kind of myth-making, and that which some of the other characters attempt. Tom sees himself embarked on a Grail-like quest for Hattie, who, like Hannah in The Unicorn, is a princess imprisoned in a 'castle perilous' (38), her jailer being Rozanov. Here is Tom reviewing his enslavement:

> Rozanov is a magician who took me to his palace and showed me a maiden. But she was something that he had made, invented out of magic stuff (39) ... Now, for the first time since his visionary slumber, Tom began to be uncertain of his role ... now the dream-like unfolding of destined action seemed to have come to an end, the magic was switched off, and he was returned to the clumsy perilous muddle of ordinary life. (40)

Fairy-tale provides the structure out of which Tom can fashion his role and his 'destined action'. But he ultimately rejects this fantasy-based love,

and so does the reader when obliged to compare his fantastical confectionery of love for Hattie with Pearl's 'daily bread love' for Hattie: 'a lived reality of family life' (41).

The quest theme is also the focus of considerable ironic humour in this novel. The conventions which guide quest tales often dictate that the successful hero shall be given the hand of the king's eldest daughter and half his kingdom, or some such formula (see Chapter One). But the reward, marriage to Hattie, which Rozanov, as king in this story, waves in front of Tom makes a mockery of that large-spirited, happy-ever-after gesture, being a bizzare mixture of the fantastical and the severely practical:

> 'I shall settle some money upon her, not a great sum. I hope, of course, that she will go to the university if she proves able to. Marriage should not interfere with that.'
> 'But I don't want to marry her! I don't want to marry anybody!'
> 'You haven't even met her yet.' (42)

Pearl is also seduced by the fairy-tale structure: she plays a kind of lady-in-waiting role to Hattie's 'princess'. But the role-playing backfires on her when she discovers, as circumstances change, that she is unable to relate to Hattie as a social equal, for she has nurtured within herself 'the soul of a servant ... I didn't *think well enough* of myself.' (43) (Murdoch's italics)

Thus with George, Tom, Rozanov and Pearl we see the consequences of dabbling in the black and grey forms of magic. Similarly, in The Good Apprentice, the opening scene has Edward 'clad in his magician's robe of sober power' (44) experimenting on his friend, Mark, with hallucinogenic drugs. He imagines Mark to be experiencing 'the Good Absolute, the vision of visions, *the annihilation of the ego*' (45), to be having 'a happy journey' - a phrase which suggests a sort of luxury coach-trip version of the original pilgrimage. But Mark is killed in this get-good-quick experiment, and it is Edward who inherits, in LSD parlance, a 'bad trip', a nightmare of guilt, and Edward too whose ego risks an unexpected annihilation. He begins to spawn a new personal mythology of retreat and decay, such as his 'chrysalis story run backwards':

> 'I used to have coloured wings and fly. Now I am black and I lie on the ground and quiver. Soon the earth will begin to cover me and I shall become cold and be buried and rot.' (46)

In contrast, Thomas is a get-good-slow practitioner of a more orthodox kind. He favours the use of enchantment myths as a form of medical intervention, and is equipped with a 'weak magic ... pale and wan against

that blackness, like a failing torch' (47). But palor is relative, of course. Thomas wants to substitute less addictive, less destructive myths, to wean Edward off the heavy drama, rather like a doctor would wean a heroin addict onto methadone. But Stuart, whose own brand of magic is bleached white by comparison, is critical of Thomas's approach, calling it too dramatic, and he recommends an entirely drama and riddle-free regime (48). His 'whiteness' in fact emerges as a bizzare physical characteristic, a less-than-human pallor, as when Jesse, who sees him as a 'white grub', announces: 'That's a dead man, take him away, I curse him. Take that white thing away, it's dead' (49).

But again it has to be stressed that Murdoch in these novels is at least as interested in the *grey* manifestations of magic as she is in unmixed white and black. We see this in the careful delineation of Diane Sedleigh's motives for becoming a prostitute. At first she embraces prostitution, in a moment of misery, as a a kind of moral suicide, the most degenerate thing she can think of. But later

> she saved herself from real suicide by acquiring a more positive image of her trade. She picked up and treasured the word 'courtesan' ... Diane began to feel that she was a wise woman performing an important public service. (50)

Diana is saved from self-destruction not by *abandoning* her self-image, which is Stuart's chosen route, but by changing it for something more positive, more life-enhancing. And when Zed, the tiny dog, is confronted by a predatory fox, he is able to stare it out because of his developed sense of doggy self:

> Zed, as he came to an abrupt stop, felt suddenly his solitude and with it the completeness of his doghood, only in which lay now his salvation ... He stared, calling up his own will and the strange authority which his species derived, alone among other animals, from the society of the human race. (51)

This incident perhaps throws some light on Stuart's curious status. Like the dangerous fox, with its 'awful eyes that knew not of the human world' (52), Stuart is an alien whose non-human gaze falls like the executioner's sword. 'You sat in that back seat staring at us and it wasn't like having a human being there at all' (53), Midge complains, after 'moral Samuri' (54) Stuart has silently witnessed her infidelity to Thomas. But Stuart is attempting a difficult compromise: to be the fox-like outsider, independent and alone, while retaining some, as it were, dog-like status as a trusted confidant of his family and friends. In fact an animal model solution is provided just at the moment when Stuart is at his lowest ebb. He is in the Underground, looking down into 'the vault underneath the rails' (56) -

symbollically, deep in the Platonc cave - suffering a near-suicidal sense of rejection, and despairing even of the attenuated ultra-low-profile Good Samaritan image he once thought he could live with in the cave:

> Now, without any image, he gazed down onto the black sunken concrete floor of the track. Then he saw that there right down at the bottom something was moving, as if alive ... It was a mouse, a live mouse. The mouse ran a little way along beside the wall of the pit, then stopped and sat up. It was eating something. Then it came back again, casting about. It was in no hurry. It was not trapped. *It lived there.* (56)

This is a potent revelation representing, for Stuart, a whole new way of living in the quotidian world. The sudden visions afforded to Effingham Cooper, Theo Gray and Charles Arrowby in earlier books were *selfless* in character, in other words they triggered the erasing of all self image, but Stuart's vision is unique in that the entirely selfless condition - the 'without any image' state - is faced and then bypassed for a condition which maintains an image, which happens to be a mouse. The timid, nibbling harmless opportunism suggested by this image contrasts strongly with the 'Rat Man' (57) image associated with the bold, voracious destructive George in The Philosopher's Pupil.

The standard against which selflessness is measured in these later books undergoes a change too. Previously, a good measure of developed selflessness has been lack of self-image, and to some extent this still holds, but now the standard seems to pass out of the human compass into the truly animal or even the inanimate world, as passages like this one suggest, where the Narrator of The Philosopher's Pupil describes the Ennistone Ring, about which, it emerges, almost nothing is known:

> Here even speculation ended. It was hard to believe that mortal men had placed them there at some time for some purpose. There they stood in the pale sad damp light, occupying a temporal moment, wet with rain, transcending history, oblivious of art, resisting understanding, monstrous with unfathomable thought, and dense with mysterious authoritative impacted being. (58)

The stones, of course, could hardly have a self image, but what that almost mesmeric heaping up of adjectives seems to establish is their indifference to projected images. Despite the activity of historians, the local inhabitants and the media to endow them with meaning, they remain 'unfathomable'; like the structure Nibletts in The Sea, The Sea, which survives 'unchipped' (59) the distorting attentions of Charles, the Ring stones somehow remain unaffected even by the controversial wire-brush restoration work they undergo. Or perhaps the message of the stones for human relationships is a new kind of solution to the age-old 'desire by

some sort of passionate magic to join together the captive loved image and the terrible free real reality' (61): the ability to be subject to and worked upon by another's imagination without compromising ones own 'dense ... mysterious authoritative impacted being'. If this is so then we have come a long way from the Iris Murdoch who appeared to insist that the 'captive loved image' must not be projected in the first place.

We have seen above how, with the stones, Murdoch seems to hint at a new way of reconciling the 'captive' and the 'free' in relationships. Looking for an analogy in Murdoch's overall approach to fiction writing, her own brand of 'passionate magic', we might expect to see a tendency to tighter, sleeker forms, and perhaps too a growing inclination for her characters to exert their contingent autonomy from those restricting forms: tighter form balanced by freer characterisation. In fact, having looked in detail at two of Murdoch's later works, there is a sense that Murdoch's later fiction is increasingly devoid of form, ceasing to be, as it were, under her spell*. To put it another way, our sense of the fictions as constructed art objects is progressively diminishing. Meanwhile, as form ebbs away, her characters multiply and colonise the pages with their family trees and relationships and preoccupations.

What we end up with is an imbalance, form losing out to formlessness in a way which goes against the grain of Murdoch's polemic article on fiction writers, 'Against Dryness' (discussed in the Introduction). Here she defines herself as a realist, and outlines the seductive dangers facing writers of contemporary fiction who attempt the realist mode. Of course, 'realism' itself is a complex area, but if we remind ourselves of the argument in 'Against Dryness' we can see that her interest in realism is essentially a moral one.

Current science and philosophy, she argues, have given us a picture of the individual which is either severely deterministic or severely existential. Our conception of the individual swings from one pole to the other, either nil freedom or total freedom, with no 'degrees of freedom' (61) in between. It thus falls to art, and literature in particular, to restore a sense of those lost 'degrees', to remind us, in effect, of what she sees as the moral reality about us. As she puts it: 'what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons.' (62)

To do this, she warns, fiction must steer a course between two poles which are the analogues of the determinist/existential divide in the real world, the 'crystalline' and the 'journalistic' modes:

> Our sense of form, which is an aspect of our desire for consolation, can be a danger to our sense of reality as a rich receding background. Against the consolations of form, the clean crystalline work, the simplified fantasy-myth, we must pit the destructive power of the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea of character.
>
> Real people are destructive of myth, contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way for imagination. Think of the Russians, those great masters of the contingent. Too much contingency of course may turn art into journalism. But since reality is incomplete, art must not be too much afraid of incompleteness. Literature must always represent a battle between real people and images; and what it requires now is a much stronger and more complex conception of the former. (63)

Her 'masters of the contingent' include Tolstoy, Camus, Shakespeare and George Eliot, whose example the twentieth-century seems to have deserted, and in fact her conception of literature as 'a battle between real people and images' can be traced back to George Eliot in her famous authorial aside from Middlemarch (1871):

> ... but place now against [the pier-glass] a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles around that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement ... the scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person ... (64)

The metaphor of fire and sun is the same for Murdoch, and the judgement upon the ego is the same. We feel the careful scorn which is being directed against that 'little sun' and its 'flattering illusion', and we cannot fail to grasp that it is the larger light of day, of the one sun, which is the source of what really is. The opportunity for self-aggrandizement and consolation which tempts the characters in the novel is also present to the author, as the above intrusion hints, but for confirmation we can look at Eliot's letters. When composing Silas Marner, for example, she wrote of the need to strike a careful balance between its structure - its folk-tale shape and the pattern of its literary antecedent - and the competing demands of character delineation:

> Consider the sort of agonizing labour to an English fed imagination to make out a sufficiently real background for the desired picture - to get breathing individual forms, and group them in the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience - will, as you say,

> 'flash' conviction on the world by means of aroused sympathy. (65)

That striving for 'a sufficiently real background' is echoed in the 'rich receding background' of 'Against Dryness', and it is important to remember that 'background' in this context does not mean setting or landscape as such, but rather the characterisation upon which the folk-tale shape or literary pattern must work. This is what Murdoch is praising when she refers to 'the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea of character'.

This constant battle, in Murdoch's fiction, to make character co-exist with form, has obvious influences on her themes, so that, for example, The Sea, The Sea is about relinquishing formal power to allow people to be themselves: Charles, the inveterate theatre director, learning to let Hartley and the others escape from his restrictive dream-plan. And, at its most crude, this is the theme of all the novels: a war between the formal curbs set by images projected from the self and the contingent otherness of real people - in Murdoch's own words, 'a battle between real people and images'.

Inevitably, this preoccupation also informs the *structures* of her fictions, so that, to take The Sea, The Sea again, the novel has a tentative structure based on Charles's desire (in the section called Prehistory) to organise his past into the form of a memoir. As his obsessions become incarnate in the figure of Hartley, so his past (his History) takes up that unrequited love as an organising centre. Finally, as he releases Hartley, admits that his diary is 'a facade' (66), and concedes that it was actually another woman, Clement, who was 'the reason why I never married' (67), he is obliged to run on beyond the self-set and neat bounds of his History into a scrappy Postscript, subtitled Life Goes On, which commences:

> That no doubt is how the story ought to end, with the seals and the stars, explanation, resignation, reconciliation, everything picked up into some radiant bland ambiguous higher significance, in calm of mind, all passion spent. However life, unlike art, has an irritating way of bumping and limping on, undoing conversions, casting doubts on solutions, and generally illustrating the impossibility of living happily or virtuously ever after; so I thought I might continue the tale a little longer ... (68)

Here the narrator acknowledges the temptation for art to console, to present a self-contained and self-serving unity, but opts to 'limp on' untidily, in a brave attempt to reflect the 'incompleteness' (69) of life Murdoch refers to. And in fact, the novel ends open-endedly with a bit of contingent hammering from the flat next door causing the magic casket of demons to fall open, a gesture which Charles interprets as both a curse and a blessing:

> The lid has come off and whatever was inside it has certainly got out. Upon the demon-ridden pilgrimage of life, what next I wonder? (70)

In Henry and Cato, the thematic drive is again the attenuation of self-image. Cato must learn to ditch the seductive mantle of 'Charisma Forbes: the swinging priest' (71), an image which is encouraging him to play god to Beautiful Joe, and to foster a less dangerous image. As explained in Chapter Four, simply abandoning all self-image tends, in all but the strongest individuals, to produce a destructive vaccuum. This theme is expressed structurally in a circular plan. The novel opens with Cato nervously pacing a rainy Hungerford bridge with a gun in his pocket, the gun being a symbol of the violent underworld into which Cato has fallen while supposedly helping Joe. The balancing point, between parts One and Two, has Cato plunged into the black vacuum of the kidnappers' cellar. The novel ends recalling the opening:

> It was raining hard outside ... The crucifix, in its case, heavy and awkward inside his macintosh pocket, banged irregularly against his thigh at each step. (72)

It could be said that the circularity here expresses pessimism: Cato has not moved. But if we remember that progress, in the Murdochian sense, is to do with vision rather than movement, we can read a modestly optimistic message into the change of image, for the crucifix is an other-serving type of image, whereas the gun was always, under Cato's weak husbandry, a self-serving one.

A Word Child has as its centre, Hilary Burde, a man whose 'cosmic furious permanent sense of [him]self as victimized' (73) turns him into a sort of god, such that he allocates 'days' (74) to people, seeing them strictly according to the rota he institutes, like a deity granting audiences. As Conradi points out, this also makes Hilary into a kind of artist, the bad kind, in that he creates 'a small enclosed world whose meanings he tries wholly to legislate' (75) (see Chapter One).

Thematically, the novel is about Hilary learning to abandon his self-image as 'cosmic victim'. Structurally, Hilary's legislation appears as a daily journal format, and when he finally begins to relax his grip on time, and admit it does not all proceed from his own tortured self, he concedes, 'It was later, later, later. There were no more days' (76), and in fact the final segments of the novel go under the free-for-all headings of the public celebrations of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and again the break in the self-imposed pattern seeems like a ray of optimism.

In The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, Blaise Gavender is able to conduct his adulterous double life so efficiently because he keeps his two lives, his 'sacred' and 'profane' worlds, strictly apart, either side of the river and either side of his divided mind. This theme of imposed formal division is expressed in the opening scene, where David and Luca, counterparts in these opposed worlds, spy on one another. As the tale proceeds and those two worlds begin to collide more frequently and with increasing violence, an expectation is set up that Blaise will have to abandon the formal division in his mind and come either to abandon one or other of these worlds, or strike a compromise between the two. For a while he oscillates between his two women, and the choice he eventually makes is to relinquish one world and embrace the other, abandoning wife for mistress. The novel might have ended here, leaving the reader to ponder how long, in the speculative future, it would take the feeble-spirited and eternally-agonising Blaise to recant his decision, but what happens in fact is that the abandoned wife is killed by terrorists while waiting to leave the country. This entirely unforeseen ending, an irruption of contingency, leaves Blaise to enjoy a guilt-free future life with his mistress. The reader, used to having events elaborately foreshadowed for him in this story, is startled by the very *contingency* of the incident, which, in as it were tidying up the stray, wounded ends of Blaise's life, gives the appearance of being an authorial blessing (like the fortuitous roundings-off at the close of a Dickens tale) which is completely opposed to the general moral thrust of the novel. The implication of all that has gone before is that reality, like the mind, must not be divided into tidy self-contained compartments, and yet, as this ending reveals, the very conventions of novel writing and reading are geared up to tidy, self-contained experiences.

The egoist Austin, in An Accidental Man, a recognisable precursor of George in The Philosopher's Pupil, chooses to view all that goes on in his life as a cosmic conspiracy plot against himself, and, like Hilary Burde, stubbornly refuses to accept that events may have an accidental quality. In this novel the structure grows out of Austin's spiteful determination to justify his conspiracy theory by behaving badly towards everyone else and thereby earning their bad opinion. And yet the contingent element leaks back into the novel by means of Murdoch's epistolatory and eavesdropping technique. Austin's rigid doom-plan is undermined by the presence of letters exchanged between characters within, on the fringes, and outside of the unfolding drama, and also by the casual overheard party conversations of minor or passing figures, which all give a sense of a much larger sphere of meanings and relationships than the small-minded Austin could ever hope

to legislate for. Again the expansive style, fighting against the narrow structure, shows in Murdoch a largely unselfconscious awareness of her own struggle to reconcile form and character, the working out of her own particular brand of 'passionate magic'.

Rather than scour the entire Murdoch canon pointing out further evidence of this struggle, it is perhaps more useful to consider her most and least successful expressions of it: the points at which she gets the balance most right and most wrong. The Black Prince is a novel with a highly wrought structure, of which the reader is made immediately aware. Bradley, the narrator, discusses various ways of opening his account, exposing the reader to his own misgivings about the gap between artistic form and faithfulness to the real world: 'Where after all does anything begin?' (77) Significantly, he is himself about to go away to write a novel, though agonising about the necessity of departing from his rigidly ordered existence, when an irruption of contingency stalls him. He hears that his friend and rival Arnold has killed Rachel. Structurally, this is the first key event in the novel, and the final key event is when Bradley hears that Rachel has killed Arnold. In the meantime, Bradley has graduated from being, at the start, not interested enough in the people or the proceedings, and resenting his own involvement, to being, by the end, so interested and implicated that he takes the blame for Arnold's death upon himself.

The satisfying neatness of this arrangement, the many additional symmetries employed - such as the rivalry between the say-nothing (saint) and the say-all (artist) kinds of writer which Bradley and Arnold respectively represent - and cross-text and within-text identifications possible with this novel's Shakesperean literary model (see Chapter Two), make for a highly fashioned art object. And yet this is not achieved at the expense of character. Bradley is aware of the shape of the tale he is unfolding in retrospect, and he is aware of the literary model which provides further shape, and of the various Freudian myths which, according to Marloe, Bradley's experience reflects. And yet Bradley, as the following passage shows, is also acutely aware of how much his and indeed anyone's motives and experience and behaviour are simply not connected to these shapes and models, how, in an important sense, it is a mistake to even attempt such connections, for these shapes, these bold 'crystals', are hoplessly crude distortions of reality:

> One feels a subterranean current, one feels the grip of destiny, striking coincidences occur and the world is full of signs: such things are not necessarily senseless or symptoms of incipient paranoia. They can indeed be the shadows of a real and not yet apprehended metamorphosis. Coming events do cast shadows ...

> However, and this is just another way of putting my whole dilemma, the grandiose thinker of the above thoughts had to coexist in me with a timid conscientious person full of sensitive moral scruples and conventional fears ... Ought I not to *decide* that everything here was trivial? Was this very brooding not itself a sin? A 'feeling of destiny' can lead too into the most idiotic of servitudes. A dramatic sense of oneself is probably something which one ought never to have and which saints are entirely without. However not being a saint I could not effectively follow up that line of thought very far. (79)

Bradley is in the intoxicating grip of form, while being *at the same time* soberly aware of the infinite limits of his own character. He can articulate the stringent requirements for being a saint in the best sense, and yet he is condemned by his own weakness to being an artist in the worst sense, and it is Murdoch's ability to portray this condition of double-think so convincingly which makes The Black Prince her most successful expression of the debate between form and character.

If we go back to Murdoch's criticism of twentieth-century fiction, it is now clear what the critic Byatt means (see Introduction) when she places novels such as The Unicorn at the 'cystalline' end of a scale with An Unofficial Rose at its opposite, 'journalistic' end. The former has too much shape, and the thin characters are crudely mangled to fit that shape by the author; the latter has too little shape and we lose the impression of character in a welter of detail. If we turn the scale into a curved line, then The Black Prince represents the zenith of that curve: a perfect tension between form and formlessness, out of which is spawned believable characters, whose shoulders are broad enough to bear the moral weight of Murdoch's particular kind of realist fiction.

In fact, if we think in terms of this imaginary curve then we can use it to give some shape to Murdoch's publishing career. At the left-hand end, chronologically speaking, would be the over-shaped Gothic crystalline novels of the mid-sixties, such as The Unicorn and The Italian Girl, at the zenith would be those successful compromises of the mid-seventies like The Black Prince and A Word Child, and at the right-hand end would be the under-shaped journalistic novels of the eighties, such as The Philosopher's Pupil and The Good Apprentice.

These later novels are very large (five-hundred plus pages) with long cast lists and minimal plotting. The powerful dramas unfolded in earlier novels featuring egotistical first-person narrators like Bradley and Hilary and Charles are now replaced by third-person narration of an attenuated kind. Stuart, in The Good Apprentice, instinctively shied away from 'anything in the nature of drama' (79), and, to an increasing extent,

Murdoch herself seems to be operating this policy. It would be unfair to say that these later novels lack structure altogether. To take The Good Apprentice, Edward's belief that his guilt is linked to a pattern of seduction - a woman enticed him away when he might have saved Mark, and again when he might have saved his father ('The similarity of the two betrayals could not be accidental' [80]) - lends a kind of Adam-and-Eve structure. More structure is provided by the literary model of Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. Edward graduates through various regions of Seegard, such as Transition, and the woods where the mysterious Tree Men live, in a way which recalls Christian's hazardous journey to the Celestial City. In the terms of this allegory, Harry becomes Mr Worldly-Wiseman, Jesse is the Giant Despair, Mother May and Bettina become Faithful and Hopeful, and so on. Again, there is potential for structure from the ubiquitous fairy-tale element as questing knight Edward attempts to rescue Jesse, imprisoned in the tower, from the clutches of the Seegard women-folk, sidestepping the seductions of Ilona's love potion (81) to preserve the purity of his search.

However, none of these strategies actually give much sense of shape to the book because we are not convinced by any of them. Seegard and its denizens are a transparently fake outfit, which convince neither Edward nor us:

> The Seegard magic was sedative, making him forget Mark's death, unhappen it. This place, these sisters, this mother, were all a dreamwork he would have to undo.' (82)

And as Edward finally departs from Seegard

> a piece of stone the size of his hand leapt out of the wall beside him. The enchanter's palace was already beginning to fall to pieces. (83)

When Germaine Greer read this section out, at the televised pre-presentation appraisal of the 1985 Booker Prize Ceremony, for which The Good Apprentice was shortlisted, she rolled her eyes and groaned, 'O, come on, Iris!', which conveyed the exasperation of the reader who has seen Seegard many times, and seen it done many times better. We can perhaps accept the 'sedative' effect of its magic on Edward, but resent its soporific effect on us.

We might dismiss Seegard as an island of failed Gothic in what is otherwise a readable novel, except that we are asked to believe in its occupants as part of our understanding of the characters of Edward and Stuart. We need to believe in Jesse, for example, in order for Edward's brooding on Jesse, and Stuart's not-brooding on Jesse, to make sense. But Jesse, who 'walks on water' (84) and has strange fits which require the assistance of the tree men, never achieves more than a perhaps

unintentionally laughable bogey-man status. And again, with Ilona, because we cannot believe that she would leave Seegard and become a Soho stripper, we cannot believe that Edward would seriously feel the guilt he is supposed to feel about deserting her. These are important failures because so much of our understanding of the central characters depends, domino fashion, upon our belief in the minor characters, in whom Murdoch has invested so many words, giving their family trees and interrelationships and so on. One passage especially, where Thomas is trying to help Edward come to terms with his Jesse-obsession, may serve to illustrate a general failing of the book. Edward is describing a dream he has had where he walks through a wood, the floor of which is covered in millions of 'acorns, beechnuts ... little dry brown things, very brittle' (86). It occurs to Edward that each one of these little nuts which he is crushing underfoot may be his father. Thomas replies:

> 'Yes, yes, you have travelled far. The soul responds, it gives back healing images. There is no end to its power to create new being. Perhaps in every grain of dust there are innumerable Jesses. Did you think that if there were so many it did not matter if you destroyed some?'
> 'I felt that I had destroyed *my* one.'
> 'Don't be afraid of your ideas, they are signals of life. Come to see me again soon. I must go to the clinic now.' (87)

We take the point that Edward has discovered that pantheism has advantages over monotheism, but it is still a lame conversation, a novelistic 'little dry brown thing', and one of the many which threaten to swamp this novel. Hilary's brooding upon Gunnar in A Word Child, and Charles's brooding upon Hartley in The Sea, The Sea, progressed the tale because these morbid preoccupations were intimately part of the form of the story; but brooding upon Jesse, because we cannot believe in him as a character, only as a sort of Maverick Spirit cypher, fails to generate a current to progress the tale, but instead takes the reader off, to mix the metaphor, into stagnant uninteresting lagoons of circumstantial detail and unconvincing speculation.

'Too much contingency of course may turn art into journalism', Murdoch warned us in 'Against Dryness', and yet in The Good Apprentice she appears to have fallen into that very trap. In fact the movement she makes is more of a leap than a fall, for the two novels which follow (her very latest), seem to embrace the contingent to the increasing exclusion of the formal, suggesting a quite deliberate policy, rather than a temporary lapse.

In my final chapter I will take up the implications of this new direction for the reader in the latest novels, and discuss how this developing brand of 'passionate magic' compares with those of other fiction writers of the twentieth century, particularly other women writers such as Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood. Such a study should serve to highlight certain limitations of Murdoch's current work which are becoming increasingly evident.

CHAPTER SIX: 'An Ocean of Reflection' in *The Book and the Brotherhood* and *The Message to the Planet*

In the previous two chapters I have tried to give some shape to Iris Murdoch's overall fiction output in terms of both the touchstone provided by her article 'Against Dryness' and her recurrent fascination with the Platonic pilgrimage. To take the former point, Murdoch's novels of the sixties show a 'crystalline' bias, the seventies are blessed with mid-scale triumphs like The Black Prince, and the novels of the eighties show a tendency to the 'journalistic'. On the latter point, Chapter Four described how a perceived* early bias in favour of 'offstage' (1) characters like Hugo and Bledyard - those seriously aspiring to the sunlit land - was superseded, around the time of the publication of The Nice and the Good (1968), by a new interest in love and a consequent shift of focus towards life as lived by the fire in the cave. This, it was argued, coincided with an undermining of the authority of those saintly offstagers, and the emergence of a new class of spokesman for goodness, the nearly-nameless 'imps' (2), notably Willy and Nigel, whose reign comes to an end with Lucius in Henry and Cato (1976), whose authority is also undermined. Chapter Five charted Murdoch's further shift of interest, from The Philosopher's Pupil (1983) on, towards the returnee: the pilgrim who has been to the sunlit land but is now faced with the problem of trying to relay his experience to the still-benighted denizens of the cave. Previous returnees, such as Effingham and Charles, were granted brief visions of goodness, of the absolute reality which the sunlit land represents. They had overwhelming difficulty in trying to sustain and communicate those visions to the people around them, but for the reader at least these were compelling moments of transcendence. But with Rozanov and Stuart, Murdoch seems to be trying to promote returnees who have not actually *been* to the sunlit land, and who can only theorise about transcendence. Thus with the returnees, just as she did with her saints and imps, Murdoch can be seen to progressively undercut their authority, as though the novels were experiments to see if the bare *idea* of goodness could flourish in the face of declining evidence of it.

In this final chapter I shall discuss how Murdoch, in her two latest novels, takes that undercut strategy a fatal stage further by robbing her returnees of any credence for the reader. As we saw with Stuart, the returnee is by definition a lonely outsider who, if he is to convey his vision of goodness, must struggle to find a niche in the world: as

explained in Chapter Five, he must find a way of combining the attributes of the wild fox and the domesticated dog.

However, there is something basically unconvincing about the outsider status of Murdoch's returnees which tends to invalidate the experiment. A look at Brian Moore's The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne will help explain what I mean here. Moore and Murdoch are contemporaries both seriously interested in the individual's struggle to come to terms with the spiritual urge in an increasingly secular society. Both writers convey the isolation of such an individual, but Moore depicts a level of 'loneliness' against which Stuart's comes to seem spurious.

This gap in credibility seems to widen further in Murdoch's two latest fictions, The Book and the Brotherhood (1987) and The Message to the Planet (1989). This is because she prosecutes the 'journalistic' mode with such remorseless energy in these books that they become packed with contingent details, with indeed a plague of the 'little dry brown things' (3) identified in Chapter Five; so much so that we lose track of what is being said in the 'jounalistic' morass and, to mix metaphors, sink into what Murdoch describes as 'an ocean of reflection' (4).

In the consequent absence of strong plot and believable character we become very conscious of Murdoch's other, normally excusable failures. So, for example, with Judith Hearne in mind, Murdoch's limited range of setting seems to leave a lot of unanswered questions about the bearing of goodness on womens' experience. I shall address some of these questions via a discussion of the novels of Doris Lessing, and of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing, which mark 'the surfacing ... of a future tradition of religious quest in women's novels' (5).

To recap for a moment Iris Murdoch's recent trials with her returnee characters, with Rozanov and Stuart the reader is asked to follow a pair of experiments into whether philosophy and a sort of secular spirituality - two potential paths to goodness - can have anything pertinent to say in the quotidian world; whether in fact the followers of those disciplines can find for themselves a workable niche in that world.

Of course, readers who are familiar with the rest of Murdoch's fiction will not be surprised that Murdoch, in The Philosopher's Pupil and The Good Apprentice, is endlessly sceptical and equivocal about the merits of philosophy and spirituality, and just as interested in the activities of those characters who foster neither philosophy nor spirituality, but manage goodness in fits and starts without resort to speculation or deep

reflection.* In The Bell, for instance, Murdoch mocks Michael's spiritual aspirations, which, alongside the behaviour of Dora, are shown to be ultimately self-serving; and the references to Wittgenstein in Nuns and Soldiers, which one supposes at first to throw some light on Guy's struggle to come to terms with death, turn out to be no more than a teasing toy when set against the more complex problems of Tim and Gertrude's struggle to come to terms with life (see Chapter Three).

But despite this handicap, Rozanov and Stuart maintain a hold on the reader's interest. In The Philosopher's Pupil, the 'demon pairing' scenes involving George and Rozanov are well handled, as is Rozanov's mad-magician attempt to trap Tom into a marriage with his granddaughter (see Chapter Five). The setting of this book, the communally familiar and yet also mysterious Ennistone Public Baths, is a remarkable creation, as are the incidental scenes, for example the inner monologues we hear at the Quaker meeting. Similarly, in The Good Apprentice, we are interested to know how Stuart's kind of ministering to Edward will compare to that of Mrs Quaid the medium, Thomas the psychiatrist, and so on; and Stuart's animal-model resolution of the problem of how to live is also intruiging.

However, in Murdoch's two latest novels the reader faces serious problems in attaching credence to and maintaining interest in the two returnee characters, David Crimmond and Marcus Vallar.

To take The Book and the Brotherhood, Crimmond is supposedly writing a great work of political philosophy which, as the 'brotherhood' who are subsidising him speculate, may change the world. He has been away, doing his solitary thinking and writing, and his return is awaited with interest. But the famous book has become a taboo subject, as Gerard notes:

> they all felt a bit guilty before Crimmond, that is before his asceticism and his absolute commitment ... the benefactors did not like to ask questions about the book in case they might seem to be anxious about their investment, and Crimmond, after suitable initial gratitude, provided no reports or acknowledgments. (6)

This is rather like the arrangement in Henry and Cato, where Henry finds he cannot believe in God, but achieves faith-by-proxy through Cato, and Cato, who does not believe either, is similarly serviced by Brendan. With Crimmond the brotherhood are buying wisdom-by-proxy. In Henry and Cato the arrangement is psychologically believable, because we believe in the characters involved in that transfer of faith. But in The Book, Crimmond is just not believable, so that an already far-fetched commission becomes truly incredible.

Crimmond's believablity is connected to the moral focus of The Book, and that focus is to do with the different possible paths to what can loosely be termed 'wisdom'. Gerard adopts the classic pilgrim mode of Plato's myth, which his old tutor, Levquist, is scathing of:

> 'You were always dissolving yourself into righteous discontent, thrilled in your bowels by the idea of some high thing elsewhere ... You see yourself as a lonely climber ... you think you might leap out of yourself onto the summit, yet you know you can not, and being pleased with yourself both ways you go nowhere.' (7)

Escape from the self, from the flickering shadows of the cave, into the stark illumination of the sunlit land, is pictured here as a solitary activity, something you do by yourself, a thrilling quest for some unattainable distant thing. But, near the end of the novel, this do-it-yourself approach of Gerard's is contrasted with that of his friend Jenkin:

> Yes, thought Gerard, Jenkin always walked the path, with others, wholly engaged in wherever he happened to be, fully existing, fully real at every point, looking about him with friendly curiosity. Whereas I have always felt that reality was elsewhere, exalted and indifferent and alone, upon some misty mountain peak which I, among the very few, could actually see, though of course never reach, and whose magnetism thrilled in my bowels (that was Levquist's phrase) while I enjoyed my superior vision, my consciousness of height and distance, the gulf below, the height above, and a sense of pleasurable unworthiness shared only by the elect ... Yes, beyond that nearer ridge there was no track, only a sheer cliff going upward, and as he gazed upon that vertical ascent Gerard paled as before a scaffold. (8)

Jenkin is still embarked on a journey (he 'walked the path') but he adopts a do-it-with-others approach which makes the journeying more important than the arriving. In spreading himself, Jenkin has his reality enhanced, whereas Gerard, identifying himself with what is 'indifferent and alone', remains feeling unreal. Gerard's attitude is elitist ('I, among the very few'), but as I demonstrated in Chapter Three, Murdoch's understanding of goodness is democratic, which confirms the ironic hint in the contrast between Gerard's 'superior vision' and Jenkin's 'looking about him': goodness is about vision, but true goodness has its vision directed towards others. The final image of the scaffold, before which Gerard blanches, points another difference: Gerard is committed to a process whose end-point is death, whereas Jenkin's 'friendly curiosity' is life-enhancing. The irony here is that Jenkins is killed in a duelling accident, and Gerard is the one who lives on to speculate about death.

Gerard's vision of goodness is solitary, Jenkin's is social, but the brotherhood, with its sponsoring of Crimmond, have a delegatory tendency.

The moral point of the book is to establish the merits of each approach. In these terms, Gerard's development is limited to the desire to take over from Crimmond, to write a reply to his magnum opus, 'an equally long book' (9). Since the sponsorship deal is dramatically the centre of The Book - the novel opens with an excited announcement of Crimmond's return - its function is to distract attention from the Gerard versus Jenkin experiment. But if one does not believe in Crimmond in the first place, then the whole arrangement collapses. In particular, the revelation towards the end of the novel that Crimmond has actually completed the famed work (we are not supposed to believe his book exists) falls completely flat.

It's tempting here to label Jenkin as a Christ figure: 'walked the path' is familiar Christian imagery, and the other characters' reactions to his death suggest a scapegoat role. For example, Tamar feels 'she had unloaded some sort of fatal evil onto Jenkin' (10); and Duncan, who had intended to shoot Crimmond when Jenkin got in the way, observes, 'It was as if, not strong enough to kill the man he hated, he had killed his dog.' (11) Interestingly, Murdoch does not use the term 'scapegoat', perhaps because she is trying to skirt the Christian myth as such and opt for more neutral, domesticated imagery. This may be part of Murdoch's increasing reluctance, discussed in Chapter Five alongside Stuart's instinctive avoidance of 'anything in the nature of drama' (12), to attach her fictions to existing myths and literary models, a reluctance to which Crimmond gives voice when Lily offers to be his 'mouse':

> 'There's a story of a lion who's kind to a mouse, and the mouse says I'll help you one day, and the lion laughs and then the lion gets caught in a trap and the mouse gnaws through all the ropes and sets him free.' (13)

Crimmond's reply to Lilly's importuning is 'Just clear off and be happy, can't you'.

In some ways this is a very brave and laudable policy: the consciousness of her articulate middle-aged, middle-class characters embraces a whole Aladin's cave of potent imagery, literary and cultural models to select from, and Murdoch goes on relaying that consciousness, conveying that nebulous jumble to us, without succumbing to the temptation of actually *shaping* her fictions in accord with any of those models. She chooses to go it alone and let the shape take care of itself.

Of course, some structure is implied by the pattern of solitary, social and delegatory pathways to goodness already described, and if we acknowledge Jenkin as a Christ figure then a further trinity shape emerges, with Crimmond as a kind of Satanic enchanter struggling with Christ-Jenkin

for a human soul in the form of Jean - and indeed Crimmond persuades Jean into a suicide pact with him. This is rather like the trinity in A Fairly Honourable Defeat (1970), where Julius is the Satan figure wrestling for human-soul Morgan with Christ-Tallis. But the contest in The Book is not very credible, partly because Jenkin is not actually interested in Jean, but mostly because Murdoch simply fails to convince the reader of the supposedly magnetic force of Crimmond's nihilism, most notably in his conversations with Jean. These exchanges are supposed to leave her feeling 'light-headed ... with her desire for him' (14), but they do not impress the reader, especially when compared to the flirtatious intellectual banter which Bradley and Julian share in The Black Prince. Because of the age-difference Bradley and Julian have, on the surface, an unlikely romance, and yet Murdoch's handling of the dialogue is both believable and absorbing. Also, A Fairly Honourable Defeat, for example, had something interesting to say about the place of homosexuals in society. The Book has no such redeeming features, only the same tired message about living within one's spiritual means that was better expressed as far back as The Bell (1958)

Furthermore, the 'journalistic' morass into which we are plunged in this novel makes it difficult for the unaided reader to spot any shape at all. On page 7, to take just one example, when we are waiting to hear about the significance of Crimmond turning up in a kilt, we have to attend first to a large slice of Rose's personal history. This, one supposes, is intended to make Rose more contingent, more real to us, to counteract 'our dangerous lack of curiosity about the real world' (15), as Murdoch puts it in 'Against Dryness'. But since it largely consists of a list of names of characters who never appear in the novel*, the real temptation is to skim over them. If the actual effect is to cause the reader to stop reading then the question has to be asked, is saturating the text with inconsequential detail the same thing as the promised restoration of 'the opacity of persons' (16).

Again, in The Message to the Planet, Marcus Vallar is a returnee for whom Ludens has developed

> an obsession, as if Marcus were the possessor of an intellectual secret, some master-key, talisman, password or radiant lump of deep fundamental knowledge, which, if it could be acquired, would shine through all other knowledge, utterly transforming it. (17)

To some extent, the reader must also share this faith with Ludens. For this novel to be a valid experiment into whether goodness and magic can co-exist, we have to believe that Marcus might have something important to say, a 'secret' or some special skill or insight to demonstrate: we have to

believe in Marcus. A plea for belief is in fact Marzillian's response when Ludens inquires about his mentor's mental health:

> 'Marcus has travelled far into remote and strange regions, not just as an objective scholarly spectator but as one who lives and *becomes* what he knows. He has the godlike power of metamorphosis, he participates, he tastes. It is impossible to travel so far and live so completely without enduring the black contingent grief which underlies all human existence ... You have tried to check him, to contain him, even to guide him, but you have failed ... I hope you will continue to have faith in him and in the part you can play in his pilgrimage.' (18)

This plea could very well be addressed to the reader. Do we accept that Marcus is on a truly Platonic pilgrimage, and that Ludens is capable of 'haling him along' (19), protecting him from backsliding, like the guide in the original myth? As Marzilian says, Marcus wants to be 'a magician ...a good magician. But is there such a thing?' (20) The familiar implication is that goodness and magic cannot co-exist, and the novel is an experiment to see if this is so. In The Book, Father McAlister comments ruefully on his own failure to be an uncorrupted practitioner:

> It was easier to set people free, as the world knows it, than to teach them to love ... The power which I derive from Christ is debased by its passage through me. It reaches me as love, it leaves me as magic. (21)

Marcus faces a similar peril. When the news leaks out that he has apparently brought Patrick back from the dead, then he becomes worshipped as a kind of messiah. Patrick adopts an apostolic role ('We shall travel the world together as poor beggarly men, carrying our message to the planet' [22]), the Stone People beseige Bellmain demanding an audience with their holy man, and the whole thing develops into what Ludens sees as 'vulgar theatre and dangerous depraved magic' (23).

The reader has a difficult job deciding how much Marcus's behaviour is dictated by the expectations of his audience and how much is down to his own eager, even manic, embracing of his role. After all, Bellmain, Marzillian's 'place of healing' (24), is what used to be called a sanatorium. Is Marcus simply deluded, becomes an important question. When, for instance, he declines to give any more 'showings', this may seem like commendable modesty, but his choice of words - 'I am unworthy' (25) - seems like a deliberate echoing of Christ's words.

And Murdoch herself seems eager to undermine that faith, to goad our incredulity, such as in the mountain dream Ludens has, where, having climbed a treacherous slope, he finds himself sharing a ledge at the mouth of a cave with a sheep-like creature and

> a bearded man dressed in a long whitish robe and looking ... like a figure out of the Old Testament. The dark shaggy animal had arrived upon the ledge, and as Ludens, still below, watched and scrambled he saw with horror that the bearded man was covering the animal with a cloth and leading it into the cave. Ludens thought, *He is going to kill it!* (26)

Here the path of Plato's returnee is merged with the biblical story of Abraham sacrificing the ram. Of course, God actually tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, and it is only Abraham's faith in the inscrutable rightness of the command that is rewarded when God allows him to substitute the ram. Here again the issue is *faith*. Ludens is faced with a version of this same faith paradox. Should he trust that Marcus, here significantly pictured at the mouth of the cave, is a worthy pilgrim inspired by some vision of goodness, or merely a power-mad enchanter wielding a knife? Significantly, Ludens is woken from the dream before he can intervene, prefiguring a real death he will be powerless to prevent. The incident where the young Fanny Amherst leaves flowers for Marcus at the Axle Stone also suggests that a sacrificial ritual is about to be played out, as does Alison's remark about Franca: 'She'll never go, unless she's slaughtered.' (27) In The Book it was Jenkin who ended up being literally caught in the crossfire, but here it is Marcus himself who dies. Like Jenkin he is immediately alloted a scapegoat role. As Patrick puts it:

> 'I feel that he died *for* me, instead of me, he took my illness when he took back the curse into himself ... He is for me Christ crucified.' (28)

Ludens' faith is tested and so is the reader's. Partly this is deliberate: like Ludens we are asked to believe that Marcus says something important in the unintelligable notes he leaves behind, while being bombarded by letters from cranks, such as this one:

> Dear Mr Ludens, I believe you are in possession of a secret discovered by ... Professor Vallar ... I should be most grateful if you would let me know it. You see - I am in possession of the *other half*. When the two formulae are united ... (29)

But mostly the undermining is done accidentally, for Marcus's reputation as magician - good or bad - is established through such unlikely pieces of dialogue as this:

> 'I see him as a god from elsewhere who has lost his way, or more likely a holy man, a sort of mystic ... He wanted to be a universal man,' said Ludens, 'and I suppose that isn't possible now. He belongs in fifteenth-century Italy. This age doesn't suit him.'
>
> 'Oh, I don't know,' said Gildas, 'this is an age of demons and amoral angels and all sorts of deep fears, like the first

> centuries of the Christian era, it's an age of extreme solutions.'
>
> 'That's right!' said Jack. 'Marcus is a demon, and he's certainly extreme! Extreme solutions are *forced* upon us now. This is just his time. Marcus is beyond good and evil!'
>
> 'Beyond good and evil equals evil,' said Gildas.
>
> 'Pat said he was like an elf or a leprechaun,' said Ludens, 'something wierd or uncanny.'
>
> 'Yes, distinctly *unheimlich*' said Gildas. (30)

Kingsley Widmer explains why these exchanges - a mix of Nietzche and fairy-tale - seem out of place when he speaks of Murdoch's failures with the Gothic generally:

> But the isolated castles and dark demons ... lingering curses and mad loves, all of which Murdoch employs, cannot help but be a machinery of too portentous incongruity when combined with a refined upper-middle class English milieu. The morals and manners of such an intelligensia provide Murdoch's materials, and, I suspect, moral limitation. (31)

As Widmer suggests, these characters inhabit a world which excludes the demon and the leprechaun. Consequently, it is hard to believe in the 'curse' Marcus is supposed to have placed on Patrick, the removal of which forms the remaining pillar upon which Marcus's credibility rests. And Murdoch, for another hundred pages beyond Marcus's suicide, relies on the reader's continued faith that, even after his death, Marcus will provide that 'radiant lump of deep fundamental knowledge' which Ludens still hungers after. The result is that Gildas' pronouncement - 'Innumerable things could have altered other things. Everything is accidental. That's the message.' (32) - is not the surprise it is evidently meant to be..

Ed Vulliamy, in a longish appraisal which includes the two latest novels, speaks of Murdoch's

> extraordinary stamina: the last two especially, reach and pass 500 pages, but are nonetheless much more concentrated and incompressible than shorter, earlier novels. Each is built with a sinewy, characteristically mysterious plot, which lures you through the first half of the book out of what feels like intense curiosity, then drives you towards the *denouement* out of necessity and compulsion. Each book closes with something akin to an explosion ... (33)

Vulliamy lays stress on the 'sinewy ... plot' which 'lures' and 'drives' the reader. But there is a problem here. A plot which propels us to an end-point whose 'explosion' is an assertion of contingency where a fated outcome was expected ('Everything is accidental. That's the message') must be peopled by 'opaque' characters. That is to say, by creations of whom the reader could truly believe 'innumerable things'. Of course, judging the

credibility of a character is a very subjective issue. Nevertheless, as already explained, a question-mark hangs over the believability of Marcus, which infects one arm of the plot. And the other arm, formed by the machinations of the Jack-Alison-Franca *menage a trois*, is compromised by the sense that this unit is a feeble and protracted copy of the Randal-Lindsay-Anne affair which was one of the strengths of An Unofficial Rose. When Jack insists on a divorce from Franca, for instance, her response echoes that of Anne:

> 'I lack substance, I lack presence, in short I'm fitted, don't you think, for just the role he is preparing for me. I deserve this ...' (34)

But whereas it was possible to feel the force of Anne's attraction to Randal - through the scenes dramatising their combined interest in the rose garden, their child and so on - it is hard to credit Franca with real feelings: they are merely asserted, never shown.

In fact Gildas' crucial remark, 'everything is accidental', is supposed to derive half of its authority from the comedy-of-errors surrounding the exchange and non-exchange of letters between Jack, Alison and Franca, for whom Ludens acts as go-between. But since that trio are as substanceless as Franca, they fail to present any sufficiently 'opaque' surface which, to borrow Franca's words, might be capable of resisting the roles Iris Murdoch has prepared for them.

Vulliamy's other point, that the novels are 'concentrated and incompressible', also seems a dubious one, for the reasons already stated. In the same article he quotes Murdoch on the limitations inherrent in writing for the theatre - she had just adapted The Black Prince for the stage - and the contrasting freedom open to the novelist:

> 'It's very like writing a poem, where every single word counts ... It's got to be the brevity of the thing that is startling. It's all got to happen in three hours; you've got to keep people sitting there and persuade them not to go in the interval, or sooner ... but in a novel, the whole thing can subside into an ocean of reflection and continuous thought - at least in a traditional novel.' (35)

Murdoch's 'oceanic' propensity* may be an antidote to the 'dry symbol', and the right medium in which to develop her 'real impenetrable human person' (36). But an ocean has drama, it has the ebb and flow of the tide, whereas what Murdoch is in danger of creating are huge stagnant lagoons filled with sprawling unconvincing characters who are feeble clones from her earlier books.

In her novels Murdoch is often comparing two manifestations of goodness, its by-the-fire social aspect, and its near-the-sun, ascetic aspect. In The Book and the Brotherhood, for instance, this is implied in the contrast between Jenkin and Gerard, respectively. Of course there are degrees of asceticism, just as there are degrees of sociability. The hermit can be confidently alone, or he can be alone with the terror of being alone. A limitation of Murdoch's sub-saintly and would-be good figures is that they tend to be of the confidently alone type*, which in effect leaves a whole area of goodness unexplored. In Chapter Five, however, I discussed Stuart in The Good Apprentice as evidence of a kind of residual existentialism in Murdoch, an attempt to depict goodness at work in a character who is, to use Laing's phrase, 'ontologically insecure' (37). This is new ground for Murdoch, but even Stuart's insecurity is something he has to largely invent for himself# - something in fact which he *chooses* for himself. The truth is, to follow on from Widmer's remark about a 'too portentous incongruity', her characters of the good are a little too secure in their milieu to be valid experiments in hermitic goodness - not forgetting that Stuart isn't actually trying to *be* a hermit, but is instead trying to combine the qualities of fox and dog. To put it in terms of Murdoch's 'oceanic' metaphor, there are bleak peninsulas of goodness which remain, for Murdoch, largely unvisited; or, in terms of the Platonic myth, despite her democratic interest in all stages of the pilgrimage, there are still many dingy, unfashionable and truly *lonely* recesses of the cave where Murdoch does not go, and where in fact she would look rather out of place.

It's perhaps unfair to bemoan the books a writer hasn't chosen to write, but it is instructive to look about and see how Murdoch's contemporaries have dealt with goodness in its isolated condition. I am thinking here of Brian Moore's The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne (1955). Judith is an impoverished spinster, moving from one lodging house to another, carrying with her little more than a photograph of her dead aunt and a picture of the Sacred Heart: two pairs of eyes who watch over her and confirm her identity. But in her emotionally impoverished life these twin icons seem to fail her, and symbolically she turns them to the wall as she degenerates into drunkenness. In an empty church she teeters on the brink of an abyss of faith, and it is interesting here to compare her thoughts with those of Stuart in a very similar scene (discussed in Chapter Five):

> The lights were out, the people had gone home, the church was closing. In the tabernacle there was no God. Only round wagers of unleavened bread. She had prayed to bread ... Empty. And above her, the night sky, curved and vast. An empty sky,

> nothing beyond it but the stars, the planets, with the earth spinning among them. Surely some design kept it all moving, some Presence made it all meaningful. But what if the godless were right ... Supposing, just supposing nobody had listened to me in all these years of prayer. Nobody at all above me, watching over me. (38)

The keepers of the host are perfunctory in their obligations, though hypocritically berating the congregation for neglecting theirs. But Moore is not just exposing the hypocrisy of the Catholic clergy, or the naivety of Judith's flagging faith, but the utter lonely void into which she is plunged when she loses it. Lonely enough at the beginning of the book, at the end she has to endure the empty patronising words of the unfeeling Father Quigley:

> 'And you know, Miss Hearne, when we feel lonely and out of sorts, it's a great consolation to remember that we all belong to one great family. The Holy Family. Ah, many's the time I think of those who don't believe in God, how lonely they must be, no friends around them ... Yes, a lonely man, he who turns away from the sight of God.' (39)

Stuart's path, remember, was one he consciously *chose* for himself, one he dropped out of society to follow, and one which it was always open to him to drop back into. He stood apart from his family and friends, emiting his 'lonely signal' (40), but at the end of the novel he is still able to clink glasses in an uneasy truce with his family. But for Judith there is no family, and her alienation is ironically emphasised by talk of a 'Holy Family', in whom she cannot believe. Stuart felt misunderstood, persecuted, hated even, but for him there was always a way back. But Judith's rejection is more frighteningly complete. We sense how disadvantaged she is as a woman in a culture where women are not allowed to be forward with men, where 'the male must pursue' (41), and where that 'pursuit' is present with the threat of rape: a society where the threshold between respectability and digrace is a very narrow one, and where religion and morals are flimsy protection from 'the beast in men' (42). But perhaps her alienation is most complete when she realises the deep connection between her religion and her culture, how the loss of the former signals the withdrawl of the latter:

> If you do not believe, you are alone. But I was of Ireland, among my people, a member of my faith. Now I have no - and if no faith, then no people. (43)

For Stuart, lack of faith in God carried no such penalty, and in any case he was able to transfer that faith to the man-Christ and his teachings, a transfer which would be incomprehensible to Judith.

The case of Judith Hearne also highlights a disappointment the reader may feel in relation to the experiences of Murdoch's female characters. Judith's problems come across as immediate and physical, such as her vulnerability outside the pub to the man who goes to buy whisky for her. But the problems of female characters in Murdoch's latest fiction fail to rise above the theoretical, and this is because of the combination of an uncharacteristic failure with the epistolatory medium and some weak characterisation.

In The Message Franca gives up her painting when she marries painter Jack, but the feminist Maisie Tether has this to say of the arrangement:

> 'He loves you and cherishes you but two painters in the family won't do. You got married and decided you weren't much good! That's our history in a nutshell!' (44)

The antagonism even emerges in the kind of painting media the sexes prefer. Jack uses acrylics, which Maisie claims are 'too neat', but Maisie uses watercolours boldly, encouraging Franca to 'let the paper absolutely *swim* with water' (45), symbolising a revolt against Jack's domination. This is interesting, but Maisie is too cardboardy, not individualised enough (she's supposed to be an American, but uses the words 'rotter' and 'hussy' [46] just like everyone else in the book*) to be a serious vehicle for challenging the point Murdoch seems to be making here: that Franca's excessive tolerance of her husband's affairs and general domination of her, though unfashionable, might represent goodness at work in a relationship. Maisie's claim is that women in this culture are at the mercy of spurious male philosophical discourses such as this one:

> 'Women are an alien tribe, they are not like us, they understand themselves through us, like plants and animals, we make them exist, they are, quite unconsciously, terrifying, they are sibyls, priestesses, queens of the night, they are frightened of themselves, they need a man to calm them and make them into friendly deities.'
> 'What tosh you talk, Jack,' said Ludens. 'All you mean is that you like to have a wife and a mistress.' (47)

At one level we could dismiss these remarks, as Ludens does, as Jack exploiting a kind of banal folk-lyricism in order to excuse his selfishness. However, it is conversations like this that are supposed to make Jack so magnetically attractive to women, so we are being asked to accept that Jack's ideas, even if *he* doesn't believe in them, have some currency. The problem is that Jack's attractiveness seems only to reside in these unexplored, undramatised assertions. Too much of what we learn about Jack's relationships with his 'alien tribe' of wife and mistresses comes to us through a batch of letters. But in these letters, some of which are

never actually delivered, the protagonists advance and then retreat across huge tracts of emotional ground: far too much to be credible without intervening dialogue. This is an important technical failure, because we have to believe in the emotional gambits which the letters represent in order for their non-delivery - the 'accidental' factor upon which so much hinges - to be significant.

In Chapter One I discussed how Murdoch's central male characters are often embarked upon a spiritual or romantic quest, the female characters often acting as disrupters or mockers of that quest. And in Chapter Four I discussed a possible new kind of subversion in Bruno's Dream, where, for a change, the spiritual questing of the female characters is serviced by Nigel Boase. In fact, females in Murdoch's novels rarely do anything that could properly be described as 'questing' (Ann Cavidge in Nuns and Soldiers is an exception), but instead their spiritual experiences tend to take the form of a quiet unselfing which functions as an antidote to the male quest. Examples here would be Ann Peronett in An Unofficial Rose, and Franca in The Message to the Planet.

The problem here is that we only see that unselfing at work in a domestic environment, an environment mainly defined by the presence or absence of its menfolk. This again produces a blind area, for we never see female unselfing except in the context of men, and in strict relation to the kitchen sink, which tends to imply that it would have no meaning elsewhere: as though, as Jack crudely asserted, 'they need a man to calm them and make them into friendly deities'.

This, according to Francine du Plessix Gray, tends to confirm an established bias in literature, that only men are truly capable of a spiritual quest, and that what women undergo is some kind of sub-species about which nothing interesting can be said. Gray takes up this point in her introduction to Margaret Atwood's Surfacing (1972). History, says Gray, is replete with examples of female spiritual experience - Joan of Norwich and Simone Weil, for example (both of whose teachings, incidentally, frequently appear in the thoughts of Murdoch's *male* protagonists) - and yet literature is devoid of examples:

> The nature of 'female' mysticism and its barely explored literary possibilities have recently received increased scrutiny from a new generation of feminist theologians. Mary Daly and Rosemary Reuther, among many others, have attacked our Judeo-Christian tradition for its exclusively masculine imagery. And they have questioned the adequacy of such figures as Father and Son for a contemporary expression - either liturgical or literary - of women's spiritual quest ... The female religious vision that [Atwood] presents ... also marks the surfacing, I believe, of a future tradition of religious quest in women's

> novels. From Emily Bronte's moors to Doris Lessing's forbidden velds, women authors have turned to nature not only in search of heightened perception but also as a refuge from the patriarchal order. (48)

Murdoch draws heavily on the Judeo-Christian tradition: as I said earlier, for example, the Christian trinity of Christ, Satan and contested-for human soul is strongly suggested by the grouping of Jenkin, Crimmond and Jean respectively in The Book and the Brotherhood. Other, non-religious, identifications are possible too (49), such as Platonist (Gerard), Existentialist (Crimmond), and Mystic (Jenkin). There is no reason, of course, why these old structures could not be exploited to say something to *retrieve* that sense of repressed female spirituality, but it is interesting that Murdoch herself chooses not to do so. For example, in The Book, one obvious strategy might have been to identify Jean, rather than Jenkin, as the Mystic figure in the Trinity outlined above.

Murdoch then, in Gray's terms, seems not to be in any obvious way part of that 'future tradition of religious quest', but her interest in 'nature' has some accidentally feminist associations. Kathryn van Spanckeren describes how the narrator of Atwood's Surfacing undergoes a process of *solve et coagula*. In the watery setting of the novel she dissolves and is purified and reformed as a new self more in harmony with her surroundings. Spankeren notes:

> Atwood repeatedly describes moments of highlighted perception as if they occurred underwater - recalling the ancient concept of *aklahest*, the secret universal solvent. (50)

Murdoch shares this alchemical interest in water too. Conradi points out that some of Murdoch's over-ambitious characters undertake a self-dissolution which is too sudden. However:

> For Iris Murdoch ... swimming seems to act as the unofficial counter-image of a healing surrender to the mysterious supportive properties of the world, as well as its mysterious destructive properties ... In A Fairly Honourable Defeat the devil Julius cannot swim ... 'My people live by the river' she once said indignantly, when charged with writing 'Hampstead novels', and the point seems a metaphysical more than a social one. (51)

Conradi goes on to detail the many ordeals by water in the novels, including Ducane's entrapment in the sea caves in The Nice and the Good, and the wisdom which Charles Arrowby learns from the insidious maritime metaphor ('Time, like the sea, unties all knots' [52]) in The Sea, The Sea, and comments generally:

> [These ordeals] also embody the wisdom ... that a brave immersion in the detail of the world, and of other lives, is

> necessary but can carry with it no indemnity against mischance. (53)

It is in terms of this 'brave immersion' that we need to appreciate Murdoch's 'oceanic' metaphor - 'let the paper absolutely swim', as Maisie Tether puts it - though when one reads of the uneditable, unfilleted 'four hefty shopping bags ... each crammed with sheets of meticulous handwriting' (54), which are the trawl some unfortunate body at Chatto & Windus had to transcribe* into a finished text for The Message to the Planet, one wonders whether Murdoch is lately confusing bravery with recklessness.

Spanckeren reminds us that language itself is a 'universal solvent' (55), that words are a medium in which we all swim. The narrator of Surfacing rejects language entirely in favour of physical sensation, and this is because she no longer wants to share that medium with others, seeing it as polluted beyond redemption by those who degrade each other and their environment: 'If you look like them and talk like them ... then you are them ... you speak their language, a language is everything you do' (56).

In the matter of the good life, Murdoch is also suspicious of language, as D J Gordon points out, 'believing in Wittgensteinian fashion that one can't get at the truth with words, that language won't let you describe accurately' (57). Hugo, in her first novel, writes a philosophic dialogue called The Silencer, Rozanov is driven to suicide by the awful realisation that philosophy cannot tell the truth, and from Bruno's Dream onwards there is a strong sense that the tight-lipped face of death is the last word on the subject of goodness.

But neither Murdoch nor Atwood seem exactly dismayed by this outlook. The narrator of Surfacing finally concedes that humans 'have to talk ... For us it's necessary, the intercession of words' (58); and for Murdoch too, despite the many injunctions to silence, the bulk of her characters remain inveterate chatterers. Gordon makes the point that Murdoch's perpetual tolerance of the chatterer and the storyteller has lately been matched by a similar licence given to her magicians, for whom she normally reserves a frown. Here he is talking about Jesse in The Good Apprentice:

> Jesse is significantly the only 'magician' in Murdoch's universe of many magicians who is fully loved, whose charisma is seen as ultimately benign ... It is significant, I think, that in a treatise written about the same time as this novel, Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues, Murdoch has allowed the severe Platonic view of art, urged by a character named Plato, to be met and finally offset ... by the more humanistic and even consolatory figure of Socrates, who actually tells us that, since we are all storytellers and are so nourished, 'we should not be too hard on ourselves for being comforted by art.' (59)

Plato, of course, disliked artists and storytellers generally, regarding them as little more than peddlers of distracting lies, and surely Gordon is right about the Plato versus Socrates debate, but I think he is wrong about The Good Apprentice. Jesse is 'fully loved', yes, but his being 'ultimately benign' seems very doubtful. The acid test is surely his response to Stuart, the eponymous apprentice. 'That's a dead man, take him away, I curse him. Take that white thing away, it's dead' (60), orders Jesse, just before the tree men are invoked to lead him away. If this is *not* to be simply dismissed as senseless raving then I think we must regard it as the instinctive hatred of the high-priest of magic for the dedicated non-magician, in the Murdoch cosmology the equivalent of the vampire's snarl at the Christian cross. Gordon's point would only make sense if Stuart turned out to be immune to the 'curse', and yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, Stuart is far from immune. In fact I am puzzled by Gordon's reading of this novel for at one stage he refers to *Edward* as the good apprentice (61), rather than Stuart, which identification does not fit the text.

Gordon also claims that there is something fresh about Marcus In The Message, that he may be

> a mystic who has somehow (that is wordlessly) reenacted the experience of the holocaust and thereby broken new spiritual ground. (62)

Certainly the powers of Marcus and Jesse are more high-profile, more public than those of earlier Murdoch magicians. Marcus, in front of witnesses, appears to raise Patrick from the dead, and subsequently becomes a celebrity. and Jesse too, who seems able to walk on water, is cloistered away from the clamorous world to protect him from celebrity. By contrast, James Arrowby's strange walk-on-water powers in The Sea, The Sea seem to be low-profile*, only on show in so far as they are part of Charles's education.

Perhaps this is where Murdoch shows some affinity with Doris Lessing, whose 'forbidden velds', mentioned earlier, Murdoch seems otherwise to shun. Sydney Janet Kaplan takes up the point that Lessing's fictions express her belief that 'the future is going to be cataclysmic' (63). Murdoch in some ways seems to write from the the aftermath of that cataclysm, to be writing 'about and for survivors of some sort of catastrophe that has already taken place and broken the thread of historical continuity.' (64). Going back as far as The Time of the Angels (1966), the figure of Carel Fisher speaks chillingly of a present age in which the virtues, traditionally thought to

be united in a continuum under God or Good, have broken apart and now roam the earth as dangerous fragments:

> 'All philosophy has taught a facile optimism, even Plato did so. Philosophers are simply the advanced guard of theology. They are certain that Goodness is there in the centre of things radiating its pattern. They are certain that Good is one, single and unitary ... Only a few of them really feared Chaos and Old Night, and fewer still ever caught a glimpse - And if they did perhaps, through some crack, some fissure in the surface, caught sight of *that*, they ran straight back to their desks, they worked harder than ever late into the night, to explain that it was not so, to prove it could not be so ... The disappearance of God does not simply leave a void into which human reason can move. The death of God has set the angels free. And they are terrible ... Angels are the thoughts of God. Now he has been dissolved into his thoughts which are beyond our conception in their nature and their multiplicity and their power. God was at least the name of something which we thought was good. Now even the name has gone and the spiritual world is scattered. There is nothing any more to prevent the magnetism of many spirits.' (65)

This amalgam of Sartre and Heidegger crops up again and again in Murdoch's fiction, its lamest expression being Gildas' remark 'this is an age of demons and amoral angels', discussed earlier. It is an existentialist reworking of the Christian fallen-angel myth, and Murdoch's post-lapsarian Lucifers include Carel himself, Julius King and David Crimmond. In existentialism nothing transcends the individual. To some extent, viewing her fiction as a whole*, Murdoch is showing the eternal battle between these terrible 'angels' and her champions of a transcendent goodness, such as Theo Gray and Stuart Cuno.

Murdoch's transcenders tend to be characterised by powerlessness. Tallis Browne, in A Fairly Honourable Defeat, cannot prevent the death of Rupert, and even James Arrowby, though apparently able to walk on water, cannot save the Tibetan boy from death by hypothermia. In the latest fiction, if, as Gordon claims, there is something new about Marcus, perhaps it is that his kind of transcendence is blessed or cursed with visible power. If so then this is a very daring departure, but one which is riddled with paradox, for the saint, like Brendan's mother in Henry and Cato, is normally characterised by invisibility. If the strictures governing visibility are relaxed then the problems of presenting such a character in a novel, it follows, should also grow less. However, Gordon notes that presentation remains a problem for Murdoch:

> The Message to the Planet attempts to put a kind of saint at the centre of a long novel, but it is difficult for us to see Marcus Vallar's life as, at one and the same time, mystically purposeful and absurdly incoherent, in large part because we are

> for so long limited to the understanding of the character called Alfred Ludens, who illuminates neither of these components, let alone their combination. (66)

In The Good Apprentice, which also strives to have a 'saint' at the heart of a long novel, Murdoch escapes this criticism by privileging the reader with access to Stuart's inner thoughts, and by providing a range of comment from the other characters.

In response to the coming 'cataclysm', Doris Lessing's characters develop special powers. In The Four-Gated City (1969), for example, Martha husbands her innate extra-sensory powers so that she can forecast disaster, and the novel ends with the birth of mutant children with those powers well developed. In this novel, Kaplan notes, Lessing quotes Idries Shah's The Sufies:

> 'Organs come into being as a result of a need for specific organs ... occasional bursts of telepathic and prophetic power ... are the faint stirrings of these same organs.' (67)

Perhaps, like Lessing's mutants, Marcus represents a sophisticated stage in the evolution of Murdoch's post-catastrophe race.

A further point of affinity can be seen if we examine what Kaplan has to say about Lessing's Briefing for a Descent into Hell (1971) and The Summer before the Dark (1973). In these novels, Kaplan connects Lessing's portrayal of her characters with philosopher Roger Wescott's definition of 'impersonality', of which he identifies three kinds:

> 'Prepersonality' - as seen in nonhominian animals and hominian infants; 'depersonality' - the alienated condition of modern humans, where personality is eroded by regimentation; 'transpersonality' - the transition experience of spiritual growth ... both the prepersonal and the transpersonal states are apparently free from anxiety, while the depersonal state is typified by a complex of wholly negative emotions ... resignation, apathy, depression, intimidation, impotently rebellious rage. In emotional tone, depersonality resembles personality more than it resembles either of the other two forms of personality. (66)

Bearing in mind my discussion of RD Laing and 'ontological insecurity' in Chapter Five, and particularly of TS Eliot's 'three conditions which often look alike/ Yet differ completely', discussed in Chapter Four, we could view Stuart's experiences in The Good Apprentice as an illustration of Wescott's definition. For Stuart treads the dangerous no-self's land between de- and trans-personality, eventually seeing a way forward literally via the mouse-hole of prepersonality. Wescott sees the transpersonal as 'the wave of the future' (69), so that, acknowledging the links between Lessing and Murdoch

in this way - and remembering Murdoch's 'oceanic' metaphor - we can see Stuart as being borne along on a modified wave of the transpersonal.

But what of the future? It would be useful here to conclude with a sense of how Murdoch's fiction relates to the trend of fiction generally in the 'nineties, for she is still writing and her novels still make the shortlists of the major literary prizes. Malcolm Bradbury in 'The Great Leap Forward' points to millenial trends, such as the end of the eighteenth century seeing the rise of the Romantic Movement, and the end of the nineteenth century seeing the rise of Modernism. These Movements, of course, arose out of the preoccupations of their times; Romanticism, for instance, being stimulated by the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. And the novels which belong to those times, Bradbury tells us, pioneer new forms, for example the stream-of-consciousness technique which the Modernists took from Freud to express the new sense of their world.

Bradbury catalogues our own end-of-millenium influences: the rise of feminist fiction, with writers like Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson; *perestroika* and the thawing of the Cold War, which John le Carre shows us in The Russia House; the influence of multi-ethnic fiction (Timothy Mo and Kazuo Ishiguro); the changing relation between Western values and Second World Fundamentalism, visible in the controvery of Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses; the rise of Latin American authors of magic realism (Gabriel Marquez and Mario Llosa); the work of East European dissidents, like Milan Kundera; the growth of the European market, increasing internationalism, green issues and AIDS. Writing just after the unification of the two Germanys, Bradbury comments:

> Change will be a major theme. There must be many a writer who, watching the remarkable political events of the last few weeks, feels like tearing up his or her next novel ...reaching ahead will, I believe, be the big theme of the Nineties ... Above all, I think, our myths will no longer live so much in the past as they did in the era of the End-of-Empire novel. (70)

None of this would seem to have much to do with Iris Murdoch (Bradbury mentions her, along with Lessing, in the context of the 1950s) except in the discouraging sense that, in Platonism, she is repeatedly drawing upon some of the oldest myths known to mankind. It's hard to imagine Murdoch slipping in a chapter about the ozone layer to please her publisher or court a wider audience*, let alone actually tearing up one of those giant manuscripts in order to write about *glasnost*.

But Murdoch's particular niche for the 'nineties, the one she has been exploiting to great effect for the whole of her career, is one Bradbury fails to mention, perhaps because its influence has been with us for so long that we could hardly class it as millenial. That niche is our need to foster a spiritual life, and the increasing difficulty of reconciling that life with our secular age.

It is perhaps in these terms that we can make most sense of the Stuart Cuno and Marcus Vallar experiments. To return to the 'oceanic' metaphor again, and that 'wave of the future', these experiments represent not so much a turbulent crashing wave we are perilously aware of at this particular moment, but the deep groundswell of history. Marzillian, keeper of the 'place of healing' in The Message to the Planet, refers to this groundswell as a distressing sound like tinnitus, which his walking-wounded hear, but which is also heard abroad. The loose terms in which he writes suggest he is speaking of a contemporary angst which, with the proximity of Marcus's crumbling sanity and imminent death, we can identify as that unresolved spiritual-secular malaise described above:

> 'This is a charming place, a beautiful place yet it is also a gateway into hell. The diseased mind is in perpetual anguish, *they* suffer it, the misery and mortality, the hopeless doomed limitation of the human soul, usually hidden from us, audible only as a threatening murmur, a ground bass of perpetual anxiety, the sound of contingency itself ... For I speak not only of the afflicted ones here, but of many who walk the wide world with smiling masks, but whose souls live in eternal fire, in a shame which robs them of their humanity.' (71)

ENDNOTES TO INTRODUCTION

*p2 Edward is recovering from the trauma of having caused the death of a friend.

#p2 Murdoch is fond of employing allegorical relationships in her novels, for examplesee Elizabeth Dipple (45) where the Christ, Satan and human soul trinity in A Fairly Honourable Defeat is discussed.

*p5 Thomas Harris (46) comments on the sometimes naive claims for the benefits of psychiatry made by the lay press especially.

*p6 Elizabeth Dipple is especially guilty here: her contribution will be discussed later in this chapter.

*p7 Here in the Republic (see Books III and X for a fuller explanation) Plato says that God creates the Forms, but elsewhere he adheres to the idea that the Forms are eternal.

#p7 See The Fire and the Sun (47) for a fuller explanation of this doctrine of anamnesis.

*p8 See The Sovereignty of Good, the section titled 'The Idea of Perfection', where Murdoch describes their potent amalgamation, and its implications for the twentieth-century novel, and proposes an alternative system of thought based on attention.

#p8 See especially Helen Haywood's thesis (48), where the influence of Sartre and Gabriel Marcel are well documented.

*p10 The remainder of this chapter will trace the direction which critical interest has taken.

*p11 This term will receive a fuller explanation later in the chapter.

#p11 For a fuller account of the reception of Iris Murdoch's early novels, see Byatt's first chapter in Degrees of Freedom.

*p13 Randall expresses his sense of containment as follows:

> 'I'm hideously - connected to her. It's odd how that *connection* survives any real relationship. And it seems to go out into everything. The roses. Even the bloody furniture.' (49)

*p16 Rather forbiddingly, the very first word of Nuns and Soldiers is 'Wittgenstein'. I suspect that many readers give up at this point, thinking they will be bored and confused by the anticipated philosophy. In fact a knowledge of Wittgentein's work is unnecessary to an understanding of this novel, and I'm sure Murdoch only starts this way to deliberately court the badge 'philosophic' novelist.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

*p21 See note to p6 of the Introduction.

*p23 The first-time reader of The Sea, The Sea would be unlikely to spot this telling piece of evidence as to the state of Charles's mind. Such discoveries are one of the pleasures of re-reading.

*p24 David Hartley (1705-57) founded a school of thought based upon the theory that complex mental phenomena are developed from simple sense impressions by a process of combination and association. Coleridge named his son after Hartley.

*p25 The notion of 'nibbling' perhaps set as a contrast to the rapacious appetite of Charles's ego.

*p31 This allusion to Peter Pan is a further interpretation of the notion of the 'lost boy', discussed later, of which several are offered by characters in the book.

*p32 A possible allusion to the cave-dwelling Prospero in The Tempest, from which 'Full fathom five thy father lies' is a line. Hilary's technique for avoiding reality is echoed in a later novel, Nuns and Soldiers, by Tim Reede, another character suffering from moral blindness, who describes his motto as '*Ianthano . . . I escape notice*' (138)

*p35 The pun on Hilary's surname, Burde, helps establish the link with Lear's too-late dec/ aration of fidelity.

#p35 Arthur drives with a 'careful efficiency' (139) which contrasts with the deliberate recklessness with which Hilary drives when Anne is killed.

*p36 In similar terms, Murdoch speaks of Jesse Baltram in The Good Apprentice being a 'maverick spiritual force' (Hermione Lee interviewing Iris Murdoch for Channel 4's Book Four, November 1985)

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

*p42 Classical Freudian analysis tended to produce untestable explanations of human behaviour. A lot of work has been done since the Sixties to reveal just how inconsistent and absurd those analyses were. See, for example, Eysenck's common-sense interpretations of some of Freud's famous original case reports, especially the chapter titled 'Little Hans or Little Albert?' (144)

*p43 See my Introduction, where the schools in question are named and further referenced.

*p44 The same virtue, as exemplified in the character of David Crimmond, is the subject of an argument between husband and wife, Jean and Duncan Cambus, in The Book and the Brotherhood (1987). The argument is conducted under similar circumstances to those which operate in A Severed Head. Crimmond and Jean have decided they want each other, and Duncan must put up with it. Jean insists:

> 'He's brave, he doesn't evade things, he tells the truth, he's the most truthful person I've ever met.'
> 'You mean he's brutal. You can't be truthful without other virtues.' (145)

*p45 In the film adaptation of A Severed Head, the screenplay of which was a collaboration between Iris Murdoch and JB Priestley, the overall impression the viewer gets is of a fast-moving macabre comedy. The role-play shuffling manifests itself as rapid partner-swaps, as it does in the novel, but without Murdoch's full narration the switches seem bizzare and implausible, so that the moral thrust of the original loses out to the laughter and general Brian Rixery of the adaptation.

*p47 See Chapter Four for a fuller discussion of Murdoch's ambiguous attitude to role-play.

#p47 One is also reminded of the shrunken heads stuck on poles in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Kurtz originally set off into the jungle in an evangelical blaze of civilizing light, but this was soon extinguished by the 'darkness' cast by Kurtz' own psyche when freed from the normal restraints of European society.

*p50 The needle image which Bradley uses echoes the New Testament parable in which access to the Kingdom of Heaven is via the eye of a needle, an allusion which tends to give Bradley's assertion further weight.

*p52 Though, of course, the wise reader and critic must always be cautious about accepting an author's statements about his or her work at face value.

*p53 Bradley's phrase 'the horror of confronting a unique human history' echoes Kurtz's cry 'the horror, the horror'. Kurtz was terrified by what he saw when he looked within himself. Here the same terror greets the prospect of looking *outside* the self at another person.

*p54 Angela Hague comments on how Bradley's verbosity manages to make his behaviour seem both impossibly absurd and perfectly comprehensible at the same time:

> Just as Iris Murdoch believes that a comic treatment of any event in no way reduces its importance and seriousness, Bradley's short-lived affair with the daughter of his best friend is presented in both a serious and comic light ... 'When God said "Let there be light," this love was made. It had no history.' (146) The comically exaggerated tone of this description recurs throughout his affair, while at the same time the reader is convinced of the reality and importance of his emotion. (147)

*p57 The fact that Arnold finds Christian, Bradley's hated ex-wife, 'an enormously nice person' sends Bradley into a frenzy: 'so she had got out of my mind and was walking about?' (148)

*p58 In fact, at the opening of the novel, the fictitious Editor (whose name, P. Loxias, is almost an anagram of Apollo) apologetically introduces himself as no more than a kind of herald ('A clown or harlequin figure who parades before the curtain, then draws it solemnly back' [149]) for a grander player to follow.

*p60 A startling image which recalls Lockwood's nightmare in Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights:

> As it spoke, I discerned, obscurely, a child's face looking through the window - terror made me cruel; and, finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes: still it wailed, 'let me in!' and maintained its tenacious gripe, almost maddening me with fear. (150)

#p60 This issue of growing tolerance will be further discussed in the following chapters.

§p60 Blaise's name even suggests the flames of the Fire in the Cave.

*p63 A further irony emerges if we apply the analysis to Blaise himself, for Blaise is also a 'failed artist' in the Conradi sense of a psychoanalyst being a 'legislator of meanings'. In wanting to have both Emily and Harriet, there is the rapaciousness expressed in the phrase, 'to have one's cake and eat it'.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

*p66 As photographers are aware, firelight has a strong yellow cast to it, compared to the bluer cast of objects seen in daylight.

#p66 See Murdoch's The Fire and the Sun (146) where this phenomenon of *anamnesis* is discussed.

*p67 This distinction between illumination and mere dazzlement is also maintained by George Eliot in Felix Holt where Mr Lyon admonishes Felix for showing off:

> ''Tis difficult enough to see our way and keep our torch steady in this dim labyrinth: to whirl the torch and dazzle the eyes of our fellow-seekers is a poor daring and may end in total darkness.' (147)

*p69 The fact that Nick *shoots* himself ironcally suggests that the energy Michael directed towards solving the pigeon problem was misdirected.

p76 Even though dubious motives attend the sale of the painting, it is only superficially degraded, for we can imagine it glowing on eternally in some other scenario, as in the case of the religious icon in The Time of the Angels. This picture is present at the stages of a long human history involving persecution and betrayal, losing and finding, but the picture remains uncorrupted, transcending human history, and, as Eugene notices, one of the few constants in a 'transit camp' world:

> The milky blue angels were infinitely sad. They had travelled a long way. When Eugene was gone they would still travel on and on, until one day no one knew who they were anymore. There was only this travelling. (148)

p81 See, for example, AS Byatt's discussion of The Flight from the Enchanter: 'What is examined is closer to being degrees of enslavement rather than degrees of freedom.' (149)

p83 See Chapter Two, where the issue of 'tolerance' is given a fuller discussion.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

*p92 I asked a friend who had recently read Henry and Cato what he made of Brendan Craddock. He could remember no such character.

#p92 His authority is undermined by the scene in which his slide show goes comically wrong, but is restored overall when his views on art are finally vindicated by Rain's acceptance of his criticisms.

*p93 James Arrowby is afforded mental privacy too, but his authority - and this applies to Theo too - is weakened by the account of his failure in Tibet.

#p93 See the discussion of Irigaray's treatment of the cave myth in the previous chapter.

*p94 See the gloss to the Penguin edition of The Republic, where we are reminded of Plato's many cautions against treating his pictures of the mind and the problem of education as scientifically true. (89)

*p95 Some caution is needed here. Despite this claim, it is hard to see how, either in her fiction or her deliberately philosophical writing, Murdoch has ever been anything but an anti-existentialist. See the Introduction for a fuller account.

*p97 See also Camus' The Plague 1947, where the disease which is killing off the townsfolk is described allegorically as latent inattention:

> 'Each of us has the plague within him ... we must keep an endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him ... the good man is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention ... Yes, Rieux, it is a weary business ... a weariness from which nothing remains to set us free, except death.' (90)

*p98 Fluid metaphors are common in Murdoch's fiction. 'Time, like the sea, unties all knots', remarks Charles in The Sea, The Sea (91); and in The Black Prince Rachel describes the husband and wife relationship so: 'She's a subdivision of her husband's mind, and he can release misery into her consciousness whenever he pleases, like ink spreading into water.' (92) This is a particularly apt fluid metaphor as Arnold is a writer and ink is the tool of his trade.

*p101 The rat metaphor is also used in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, where the self-interested Blaise Gavender, wavering between fidelity to his wife on the one hand and to his mistress on the other, seeks for 'some decent and not too painful, not annililating, way out, some situation which could expunge his fault'; the moral timidity of this hoped-for solution contrasting with the imagined alternative: 'to die like a rat in a storm drain'. (93)

*p110 See Chapter Two, where the implications of Blaises's particular brand of Freudianism are further discussed.

#p110 The popular nickname which has been coined for the psychiatrist, the 'shrink', is worth remembering here.

*p114 Murdoch takes up this image when she talks about 'the high-temperature fusing power of the creative imagination' (94). See Chapter Two for further discussion.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

*p117 And saving a consideration of Murdoch's two latest books - which, though having the same focus, seem to represent a further departure - for the final chapter.

*p119 The title also alludes to The Sorcerer's Apprentice, thereby suggesting initiation into magical rites, and, as in the Disney cartoon, the likelihood of mischief.

*p122 Stuart is a fascinating creation in many ways. Iris Murdoch seems to put a lot of effort into robbing him of any glamour, but perhaps, in spite of this, the long passages reporting his inner thoughts on eschewing glamour give him a sort of heroic status with the reader. I took up this point, of the implications of attempting to depict a character of the good, in correspondence with the author:

> I also feel in the case of Stuart that you have made a conscious effort to make him 'interesting' to the reader as a character of the good - for instance in devoting quite a lot of space to his inner thoughts (Brendan Craddock in Henry and Cato, for example, is given no such space) and in giving him a positive, even passionate, interest in education (compared to, say, Tallis Browne's low key faith in that subject in A Fairly Honourable Defeat and in allowing his interventions in the problems of the people around him (Mark's mother, Midge and Harry) to have successful outcomes (one thinks of the frustrating negativity of Ann Peronett's achievements in An Unofficial Rose.) Do you find the unattractiveness of good a problem when you're writing?

She was in reply slightly cagey about this, though conceding 'that all your "intuitions" seem to me to be good ones ... about Stuart's lonely "goodness" for instance.' (from June 1988 correspondence)

*p127 I did wonder if real psychotherapists used such arcane terminology, but apparently at least some of them do, as a recent book review demonstrates:

> 'I think my quarry is illusion. I war against magic. I believe that, though illusion often cheers and comforts, it ultimately and invariably weakens and consticts the spirit.' ... It's dangerous, Yalom concedes, to strip away illusions if you have nothing to replace them with. (87)

*p128 In The Book and the Brotherhood the parrot called Grey 'resited Gerard's "pieces of eight", turning his intelligent attentive head firmly away' (88). Instead Grey says 'Grey is grey'. Perhaps here Murdoch is making a point about our human inclination to view matters as either black or white, good or bad, cave or sun, etc., 'pieces of eight' being a kind of end-of-the-quest catchword which Gerard, a believer in goodness as a glamorous all-or-nothing phenomenon, would like to hear echoed (see Chapter Six for a further discussion). But the parrot sticks doggedly to an altogether more dowdy formula, suggesting that the real business of life and moral endeavour is conducted in the unglamorous middle-ground.

*p132 In correspondence I asked Iris Murdoch whether she felt she was increasingly relaxing authorial control in her later novels:

> [Authorial control] seemed to me a major preoccupation of The Philosopher's Pupil, especially in scenes such as the funny one where a string of participants follows George down to the canalside to spy on or 'look after' him. Last in line is the narrator himself, N, who is stationed unseen on a contingent pile of household rubbish. There is a strong sense here of a possible involvement being withheld, or perhaps just a sense of

> powerlessness (Father Bernard, for instance, who is 'looking after' Diane, does not believe in God). Certainly there are long detached perspectives, with intimations of 'what, at the end ... if that can be imagined, someone, perhaps God, might feel about George'. Similarly, when Stella runs to N for sanctuary, the reader's expectations of an involvement occuring between these two are frustrated (at least mine were). Is this an oblique comment on the ideal role of the artist/author - an attentive but disinterested observer?

Interestingly enough she denied that there was any 'implied comment of the author's role (eg in Philosopher's Pupil)' (from June 1988 correspondence). Paradoxically this denial makes me feel more certain that Murdoch intends these scenes to represent that ideal role.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

*p142 As explained in Chapter Four, partly this was the influence of critic Elizabeth Dipple, and partly a real bias on Murdoch's part.

*p144 That democratic apprehension of goodness, the notion that it is not just a quality peculiar to an elite few, which Chapter Three was anxious to stress, was confirmed in an interview for Icelandic TV in 1986 when Murdoch was asked

> 'You deal with the extraordinary rather than the ordinary - does the ordinary bore you?'
> 'No, it's rather that I think everybody is extraordinary ... I think every character is interesting, and has extremes and obsessions and fears and passions which they don't admit to. It is the novelist's privilege to be able to see how odd everybody is.' (72)

#p147 Some of the names allude to minor characters in previous Murdoch novels. For example, Robin Topglass is 'son of the birdman' (73) Peter Topglass in The Bell; and the popgroup the Waterbirds, who play at the midsummer ball, are the descendents of the Treason of the Clerks, who, with Hilary's lodger, enjoy brief fame in A Word Child: a song called 'Waterbird' is their hit record.

*p151 Murdoch's apparently flexible attitude to play-writing does not extend to her novel-writing:

> Iris Murdoch is famous for forbidding any sort of editorial interference: in her novels not a comma is allowed to be changed; they are printed as written or not at all. (74)

*p152 As explained in Chapter Five, even seeming 'loners' like Brendan Craddock and James Arrowby have behind them the support of a Jesuit community or soldier's regiment.

#p152 See Chapter Five, where Stuart's curious disinvention of his mother is discussed.

*p154 There is a tendency for all Murdoch's characters, regardless of age, sex or background, to use the same vocabulary and have essentially the same preoccupations. A notable example is in The Book and the Brotherhood, where Gulliver, unable to make a living for himself in London, gloomily waits on a station platform for a train to carry him north to Newcastle to try his luck with the 'bottom' people, as he thinks of them. On the platform he is engaged in conversation by a tramp, who discusses God, sin and logic. Gulliver gives the tramp some money but:

> wished he had given the man his coat, or rather he wished that in some other ideal life some Gulliver, who was certainly not himself, had been able to enact a good action spontaneously without degrading it into sup erstition. (75)

This is interesting but there is no attempt to make the tramp a believable character, and the overall effect is that the tramp merely serves as a cypher in Murdoch's re-running of the Good Samaritan parable. Other writers have noticed this too, for example see Rosemary Dinnage's review of Nuns and Soldiers, wher she points to some typical naturalistic flaws:

> We have some dialogue between a couple of penniless artists. They say things like 'Jesus bloody Christ' ... would they also say 'you unspeakable cad' and 'stow it' ... would they talk of

'National Assistance', a term that has been out of use for fifteen years? (76)

*p157 Iris Murdoch's handwriting is not easy to read, as I have discovered from corresponding with her. A recent interview article (77) contains a copy of a manuscript page from The Message to the Planet. I am not sure what the point of including this was, except perhaps to demonstrate its illegibility.

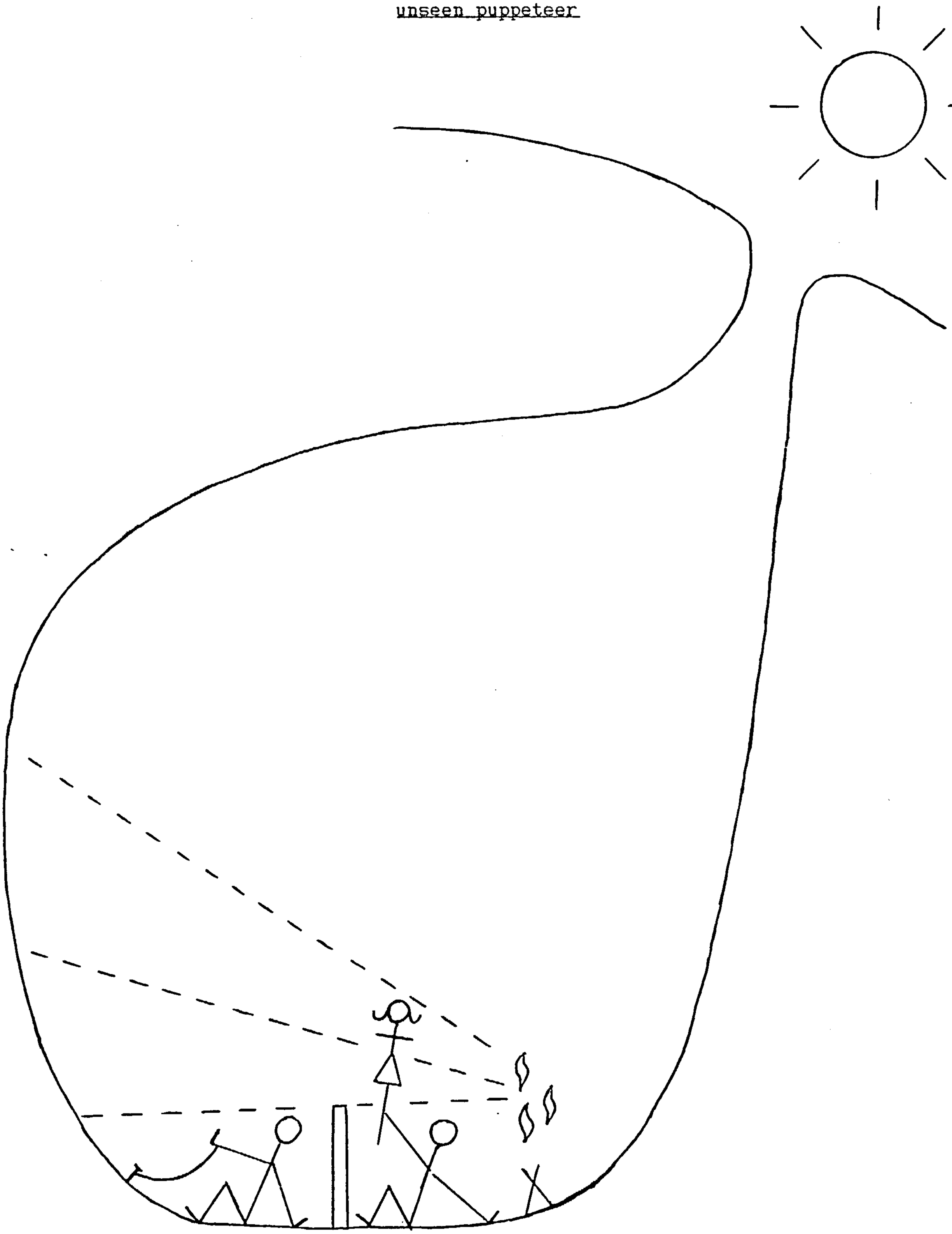
*p158 In interview Murdoch seemed to want to underplay James's abilities. Here she is addressing the point:

MURDOCH: Charles is not mistaken in thinking that James hauled him out, and James did haul him out.
INTERVIEWER: By standing on the water?
MURDOCH: Yes, or something, yes. (78)

*p159 'Angel' and champion occasionally appear together in the same text, notable Tallis Browne and Julius King in A Fairly Honourable Defeat, and Jenkin and Crimmond in The Book and the Brotherhood, but usually there is not this extreme polarisation in one novel.

*p161 See note to p152 above.

DIAGRAM SHOWING THE LAYOUT OF PLATO'S CAVE BEFORE THE JOURNEY TO ENLIGHTENMENT HAS BEGUN: The prisoner is chained to and facing the back wall of the cave and sees nothing but the shadow-play orchestrated by an unseen puppeteer



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